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Chapter Three

Environmental Constraints and Private Pursuit

3.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses how the constraints in the harsh material environment vigorously perpetuate the continuity of the tendency towards private pursuit in Somalia. Moreover, the chapter delineates several decisive facets of the tendency towards private pursuit, notably the competition for livelihood survival, narrow identity and parochial social and political arrangements. In doing so, I will depart from the traditionalist line of reasoning. That school takes an essentialist line of argument and claims that primordial clan animosity (which is indeed a single variable of the tendency towards private pursuit) is the only factor of continuity. However, the proponents of this traditionalist thesis fail to consider the underlying material deprivation, which maintains the persistence of clan structure in the social relationship of the Somali society. Furthermore, the traditionalist writers neglect other particularistic aspects of the tendency towards private pursuit in the economy and the political sphere that are also of continuity.

In Somalia, the continuity of the tendency towards private pursuit is sustained by the limited development of productive forces in the country, while the low and insufficient level of productive forces is largely conditioned by the constraints in the material environment such as the cycles of extreme climatic conditions and the extensive exploitation of the land required in rearing the livestock. As I outlined in the introductory chapter, Somalis waged the struggles for private pursuit for different motives during the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. For instance, during the pre-colonial period when the communal mode of production was dominant, the tendency towards private pursuit was what pushed the lineages and family related groups to aid mutually and cooperate economically, socially and politically. Thus, in the early communal formation of the Somali people, the tendency towards private pursuit worked to encourage collectivism and communal survival. By contrast, since the colonial state was imposed on Somalia and the peripheral capitalist mode of production became prevalent, the tendency towards private pursuit was profoundly altered, so that individualistic economic and power interests predominated. The reason is that in the communal mode the relations of production are regulated by kinship relations, while in the peripheral capitalist mode the relations of production are mediated by capitalist market relations.

3.2. The Communal Mode of Production

In pre-colonial Somalia, pastoral nomadism was the primary communal mode of production. The pastoral mode of production can be appropriately understood as one of variable communal modes of production. In other words, pastoral economic activity is one sort of the various sets of the communal modes. For the purpose of this study, pastoral nomadism is an economic existence based on extensive use of pasture in a condition where the level of technology is still simple (Max 1981; Moghadam 1988). In early Somalia, pastoral
production, which was the livelihood of the majority of the population, coexisted with other modes of economic activity - such as agriculture and trade. Yet, both economic activities were marginal and remained subordinated to the dominance of the pastoral mode of production. Thus, in pre-capitalist communal Somalia, it was the pastoral mode of production which prevailed over other modes of economic existence.

However, in Somalia, the dominance of this meagre pastoral economy is conditioned by the constraints in the material environment. The nature of the ecology in the country is semi-arid where the rain is very scarce and climate is extremely harsh. Therefore, the only economic existence this poor environment can sustain is that of animal husbandry. According to David D. Laitin and Said S. Samatar:

"In this land of hardy vegetation, steaming sand dunes, and sun-baked coastal plains, the Somalis have evolved during the centuries a way of life peculiarly suited to their demanding environment: on the one hand, a transhumant pastoralism designed to maximise the meagre resources of water wells and pasturelands for the pastoralists and their herds and, on the other hand, a social organization that encourages collective action and mutual aid" (Laitin and Samatar 1987:22).

The animals the Somali nomads rear in this demanding environment are goats, sheep, camels, and less commonly cattle. As cattle need frequent watering, raising them on this waterless environment with low scrub bush is hardly possible. It is the smaller pockets in the river area, south of the country which are conducive to cattle husbandry. However, even rearing other animals such as camels, sheep and goats in this dreadful environment is not an easy occupation since that itself demands a constant mobility. The scarcity and the uneven distribution of the rainfall push the pastoral nomads to move frequently with their livestock in search of water and pasture. This constant migration however is the best rational strategy and the best 'tactical adaptability' to assure that the pastoral nomads in Somalia can survive despite the constraints in the material environment (Braun 1989; Doornbos 1993:104).

Among the livestock that the Somali pastoral nomads raise, camels because of their greater material value remain the mainstay of livelihood. Camels have a strong capacity to endure harsh conditions and unique stamina and ability compared with the sheep and goats. On top of this superior quality for endurance and resistance to drought, camels also give prestige to the owner since they constitute a symbol of wealth and richness. This accords camels therefore the highest esteem among the Somali pastoral nomads.40 The following classical Somali poetry testifies to the significance of the possession of camels:

"He who does not own camels lives under the protection of others. At a place where camels did not calve I will not stay. For a man who owns no camels, the event of his death will pass unnoticed" (Rirash 1988:64-65).

40 The status of camels in the eyes of the Somali nomads can be compared to the horses of the nomads in Central Asia. The Central Asian nomads accord horses high esteem because of their usefulness as a means of transport and for herding the livestock. For example, the Central Asian nomads venerate in numerous proverbs and poems the horses in a similar manner as that of the Somali pastoral nomads with respect to camels (Leeuwen, Emeljanenko, and Popova 1994).
For the livestock economic production in Somalia, the grazing land is not owned privately but is owned or controlled collectively. This collective ownership of the pastureland provides the kin-related groups inhabiting the area with a certain priority right for the use of the pasture resources. This arrangement however will not deny access to others from the distant lineage groups as long as there are sufficient pasture resources for all (Swift, 1977). By contrast, the animals are privately owned. Each household, which is the basic social unit of production, possesses its own herds. Furthermore, this household-based livestock production was an occupation engaged in by all adult members of the nuclear family. In other worlds, each able-bodied individual participated in the production of the scarce livestock economy for the survival of the whole family. Consequently, this limited development of productive forces in the subsistence pastoral economy is what in fact prevented the emergence of individualised private pursuit in the early communal formation of the Somali people.41

In Africa today, Somalia is the only country where pastoral nomads still form the majority of the population. About 65% of the Somali people still lead a nomadic life and practise pastoral economic production, which is in fact the highest percentage of any country in the world (Gesheket 1997:68).

Also, compared to the rest of Africa, Somalia is a country in which the livestock production remains the backbone of the economy even today.42 According to Marx, transhumant pastoral nomadism has been the first form of maintaining human existence. Marx then writes in the Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations that:

"We take it for granted that pastoralism or more generally a migratory life, is the first form of maintaining existence, the tribe not settling in a fixed place but using up what it finds locally and passing on" (Marx 1964:68).

Yet, for the pastoral nomads in Somalia, generations after generations are still preoccupied with this mode of living of what Marx again refers to as a "given natural instrument of production" (Marx 1970:68). Likewise, Karl Polanyi (1966) concurs with Marx and terms this simple pastoral mode of production a "natural economy" as it is largely the consequence of the climatic environment. However, most discussions on the residues of natural economy and on the types of communal modes of production that existed in the precapitalist formations are limited to hunting and gathering and settled cultivation as if pastoral nomadism does not exist as a means of economic livelihood. The reason perhaps may be that, in the West, the pastoral mode of production has been insignificant historically and in the process of economic transformation has totally disappeared. For instance, when Cox lists the residue of communal modes of production of pre-capitalist formations, he notes only four modes as if they are the only existing forms of economic activities. Cox writers that:

"Four modes of social relations of production, all originating in the precapitalist era of simple reproduction, survive in social formations characterised by dynamic development, whether of the capitalist or redistributive types. These are

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41 The reason was that the means of the production were too limited and the productive forces of the family members owned it collectively.

42 For instance in 1990, of the entire livestock population in the continent of Africa, Somalia owned 43% of camels, 2% of cattle, 10% of goats and 5% of sheep. This recent statistics was compiled by the Department of Planning and Statistics of the Ministry of Livestock, Forestry and Range in cooperation with GTZ (Damooei 1997:275).
subsistence agriculture, peasant-lord agriculture, the primitive labour market, and household production” (Cox 1987:35)

In the list what is missing is pastoral nomadism, which is the oldest form of social production and human existence. Pastoral nomadism is not only an ancient form of simple reproduction, but it is still an economic mainstay of several minor societies in the peripheral areas like Somalia, where it has survived despite its subordination to the capitalist world economy.

Pastoral production is an economic activity, which does not produce surplus. In fact, it is an economy of simple subsistence, which is not at all self-sufficient. And this lack has been the main reason, which forced the pre-capitalist Somali pastoral nomads to establish barter relations with the outside world (Abdi Samatar 1989). Somali nomads bartered their livestock and livestock products for grain and clothing brought in by long-distance traders. However, a more structural problem is that pastoral economic activity hardly grows beyond bare subsistence level. And even if it is compared with other economic activities it becomes obvious that nomads everywhere are faced with the same problems of resource deprivation (Khazanov 1983). Everywhere, the salient feature of the pastoral economy is essentially non-autarkic. Alluding to rich historical data regarding the nomads in Central Asia, Khazanov argues that this material deprivation historically forced many traditional pastoral nomads to wage frequent wars in order to conquer sedentary agricultural and urban societies mainly for economic gains.

Early Somali pastoral nomads did in reality wage frequent wars to conquer the sedentary farmers inhabiting the fertile pockets located in the south of the country. But the number of the pastoral nomads from the semi-arid zones in the north who migrated to the agriculturally productive areas in the south were in fact very small. The nature of the conquests and the historical process of this migration have been already extensively documented elsewhere and thus further repetition is not necessary here. What I am interested in exploring here is: How the majority of the pastoral nomads who are still the largest part of the Somali population survived in the challenging environment of the country for centuries? And how the coping mechanisms they adopted to subsist in the meagre pastoral existence affected their economic, social and political outlook? Among other coping strategies that the Somali nomads have opted for, two are worth noting because of their far-reaching ramifications. The first survival strategy that the traditional Somali pastoral nomads have adopted has been to organise the pastoral production on the basis of small primary units. Central to this coping mechanism is the making of the nuclear family the basic unit of production. In Somalia, the clan, which is the highest political unit, occupies and controls a specified grazing territory but it lacks both the capacity and the power to organise the pastoral production. This function is therefore left

41 Khazanov uses the term non-autarkic to denote that all kinds of pastoral production not only lack surplus but also do not at all generate a self-sufficient means of living. More on this discussion, see further Khazanov (1983). According to Moghadam, “the highly specialised nature of pastoral production does not allow nomads to be autarkic and requires that they enter into a socio-political and economic relation with the sedentary people” (Moghdam 1988:397). A better explanation perhaps is that since pastoral nomads everywhere repeatedly face frequent draughts because of the constraints in the environment, establishing trade and economic relations with the outside world is indeed needed for sheer survival.

to the units at lower levels of the clan segmentation to pursue it privately and independently. These units can be a single household, clusters of households, ‘dia-paying groups’ \(^{45}\) etc.

The second survival strategy that the Somali nomads adopted has been to disperse as widely as possible in order to utilise effectively the marginal pasture resources on the land. As the productive capacity of the land is very limited, this method of extensive pastoralism permits the nomads to cope with the ordinary environmental hazards. In this pattern of organising the production, the primary agnatic units are allowed to move freely in the areas which the clans to which they belong control. Accordingly, these agnatic units who fragment further into smaller close-knit groupings wander around and appropriate whatever pasture resources they can get on the land, be it water or grass. Thus, both of the coping mechanisms that the traditional Somali nomads have adopted were suggested to be highly rational and environmentally sound. According to Abdi Samatar:

"Pastoral production required mobility and flexibility in order to adequately utilise marginal ecological conditions. Given the precarious environment and precapitalist technology, units of pastoral production were small and widely dispersed to avoid resource depletion" (Abdi Samatar 1989:23).

This is true. Somali pastoral nomads could not have survived living in this harsh environment in the country for centuries if they had not organised the production of their pastoral livelihood skillfully. However, the marginal environment that conditioned the household to be the basic unit of production and forced the pastoral nomads to disperse as thinly as possible have also wrought characteristics specific to the Somali society. And although these salient features emerged in the distant past of pre-colonial traditional Somalia they still influence the contemporary dynamics of the society. First, the regular mobility that the organisation of the pastoral production requires still prevents the Somali nomads from settling and remaining in a fixed place permanently. Second, specified clan-inhabited geographical zones developed very early before the establishment of the nation-state in 1960. See the clan-based territories on Map 2. Even now a certain Somali clan is claiming that on the basis of that early traditional clan-inhabited zones, it should be recognised as a clan-based state. \(^{46}\) Third, the limited development of productive forces in the subsistence pastoral economy still remains a factor, which perpetuates the continuity and the primacy of the kinship ties in the social organisation of the Somali people. It is in this last instance that I am challenging the thesis of the traditionalist writers who claim that it is the primordial blood ties which perpetuate the clan dominance in the social organisation of the Somali society. This argument of the traditionalist proponents can be refuted as it is common everywhere that pastoral nomads organise their social relations of production through a kinship system. \(^{47}\) Thus, the prevalence and the

\(^{45}\) Dia-paying group or Jilib in Somali is the smallest unit, which is also the most stable and fundamental political structure of the Somali clan system. Members of the dia-paying group are closely related families who are united by the sheer necessity of mutual aid and cooperation without which survival in this harsh environment is hardly possible. They therefore enter a joint contract (heer), which pledges the contracted kinsmen to act in concert and help each other when individually or collectively they face a threat from members of other distant dia-paying groups.

\(^{46}\) The Somali Isaaq clan inhabiting in the northern Somalia or Somaliland as it is now call, use in addition the argument that the area was colonised separately by the British as a fundamental reason that must entitle them the international recognition as a new and independent nation state. See further, Hussein Adam, ‘Formation and Recognition of New States: Somaliland in Contrast to Eritrea’, in: Review of African Political Economy, vol.21 (1994), no. 59.
apparent manifestation of kinship relations are neither unique nor specific only to the Somali society. In fact, everywhere, it is the level of the productive forces of the pastoral economy, which gives rise to and maintains such finite social relations and not primordial consciousness as claimed by the traditionalist scholars. 48 Fourth, because of the lack of an institutionalised hierarchy, pre-colonial traditional Somali society was stateless, for the simple reason that the prevalence of the lower technology of pastoral production in Somalia reproduces its simple kin-ordered political organisations. Ibn Khaldun 49 was the first who brilliantly analysed the relationship between the precarious material existence of the pastoral nomads and its corresponding rudimentary political organisation in North Africa in the fourteenth century. And in his thesis, Ibn Khaldun locates the absence of a higher level of political superstructure among the pastoral nomads in the extremely rudimentary nature of their productive activities. 50 Fredrik Barth (1973) concurs with the argument of Ibn Khaldun. Barth writes that the dearth of political structure beyond lineage and kinship relations among the pastoral nomads is conditioned by their meagre material basis that neither needs nor can maintain it.

In this study what I am trying to explain without sounding an ecological determinist is how the constraints in the material environment impinged on and determined the mode of livelihood and the social organisation of the Somali society throughout time. As Evans-Pritchard explicates: “in a general sense, modes of livelihood, together with environmental conditions, which always impose effective limits on modes of livelihood, determine the dominant values of the peoples and strongly influence their social organisations, including their political systems” (Evans-Pritchard 1940:8). In a nutshell, in Somalia, the ecology has given rise to a society, which organises along clan and lineages lines and pursues its economic survival in smaller groups. Thus, in pre-colonial Somalia, due to the constraints of the material environment, there was no sustained collective solidarity and cooperation beyond the lower levels of lineage. Put differently, there was no Somali-wide collective pursuit but a parochial kin-oriented private pursuit. In times of peace, this was largely the case. However, in times of war, be it internal or for that matter, external foreign invasions across borders, a temporary realignment and cooperation at clan or a Somali-wide level was possible. But this collective solidarity was often short-lived as it withered away as soon as the threat of war disappeared. In this respect, what was constant was the cooperation of the smallest units of the clan such as the nuclear family or a number of families related in blood in organising the production of the livestock, well-digging, physical protection, occasional ritual ceremonies and other similar functions in these narrowest spheres (Sahlins 1968). And the reason as Wolf

47 As Samatar explains, “social theorists argue that blood-ties in the old tradition were part and parcel of communitarian social relations whose primary purpose was to ensure the production of necessities in the pastoral range” (Abdi Samatar 1992b: 630).


49 Ibn Khaldun was a fourteenth century North African statesman, jurist, historian, and scholar.

50 For further elaboration, see the classical book of Ibn Khaldun, The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History (London: RKP, 1967); particularly chapter 2; see also Yves Lacoste, Ibn Khaldun: The Birth of History and the Past of the Third World (London: Verso, 1984). Lacoste commenting on Ibn Khaldun writes, “if a privileged minority is to emerge and exercise something more than a moral influence over the tribe, there must be surplus available for appropriation. No such surplus exists in these poverty-striken groups” (1984:112). With respect to the Somali clans, I.M Lewis has recorded how some Somali pastoral nomads who migrated from the arid desert in the north and settled in the agriculturally rich areas south of the country after adopting farming have developed a hierarchical and a formalised authority of leadership (Lewis 1955).
suggests is that “the ties of kinship set limits to the amount of social labour that can be mobilised for collective purposes” (Wolf 1982:99). Perhaps it maybe argued that the dominance of the ties of kinship is what perpetuates the tendency to clan and lineage rather than a Somali-wide solidarity in Somalia even now. Here, a theoretical interest worth consideration is how the workings of the tendency towards private pursuit provide positive impulses at sub-national or sub-sate levels in terms of security, communal solidarity and group survival but negatively affect at the national and state levels of the Somali social formation.  

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51 A seminal analysis of the how the positive impulses of the tendency towards private pursuit guarantees the physical, social and economic security of the Somali population at the sub-national and sub-state levels is recently provided by Maria Brons in her book: Society, Security, Sovereignty and the state in Somalia: From Statelessness to statelessness? (Utrecht: International Books, 2001).
3.3. The Dominance of Kinship Relations

In Marxian historical materialism, a mode of production corresponds to a single dominant set of social relations, which has arisen from a finite level of development of the productive forces. In the Somali context, it is the pastoral communal mode of production that creates and recreates the dominance of kinship relations, for the simple reason that pastoral economic activity has a very low development of productive forces which cannot afford or permit the development of a social structure beyond the kinship system. Therefore, in the communal formation of Somalia it was the kinship relations which regulated the productive forces of the pastoral economy. As Samir Amin explains:

"It seems obvious that the low level of development is inextricably linked with lineage, clan, and tribal relations.... Thus, wherever we find these relations, the level of the productive forces is necessarily low, and where we do not find them, it is necessarily high. The existence of these relations is furthermore the expression of the dominance of kinship (and the absence of the state)" (Amin 1980:48-9).

For the Somali pastoral nomads the kinship system not only regulated the production of the livestock economy but also governed all aspect of the cultural, social and political life of society. There is now an ongoing fierce debate between the two dominant schools of Somali studies about the elements of which kinship is constituted. For instance, traditionalist writers explain kinship simply as that of “blood and bone” as epitomised by I.M. Lewis, while transformationist contenders understand it as an institution or an ideology on the other hand. 52 Ahmed Samatar debating with the traditionalist scholars spelled out what kinship system in essence embodies. According to Samatar, the kinship system in pre-colonial communal Somali society was partly blood-ties and partly a customary law. It was partly blood-ties reckoned through patrilineal lines. Somalis trace their close or distant family relations through male ancestry. Normally, those closely related groups are expected to enter into a joint contract for mutual aid and cooperation in order to survive in the harsh environment. Thus, the blood descent element of the kinship system was significant because it served as the basis of bond and solidarity that guaranteed the physical and economic security of the smallest units of the lineage segments. The kinship system was partly a customary law or heer. This other component of the kinship ideology served to regulate the wider social relations of the clans and the clan-families at the highest political apex. Heer is a secular and unwritten social contract. Somali pastoral nomads used heer norms, rules and regulations to maintain the social order of the whole community at different political levels. For instance, lineage segmented groups enter into heer social contract for different needs such as not making use of each other’s pasture zones and bore wells without prior permission. Also, neighbouring clans enter into heer treaty for a peaceful coexistence. Moreover, heer sanctions are used as conflict settlement mechanisms when tension arises between groups and lineages for the access to the meagre resources such as water and pasture. Furthermore, heer rules are applied to instances of homicide,

injury, robbery etc. The men who specialise in the procedures of heer laws are known as ‘wisemen’. For instance, since the Somali language was oral, it was the successive aged elders of the pastoral nomads who were the repositories of the heer laws. And it was in this way that every generation transmitted heer constitution to the next generation.

Samatar carries the debate further. He explains that this secular kinship system spelled out above was not the only value which regulated the social relations of communal Somalia. Religious dictates of the Islamic sharia also played a complementary role, albeit a secondary one. For instance, sharia laws were infused with the secular heer rules in order to enhance the effectiveness for the mechanisms of the political mediation. Islam came to Somalia around the tenth century when Arab proselytisers first arrived at the coastal towns of the country. Accordingly, as the Islam belief system widely spread in the country, native religious men (wadaado), specialising in sharia laws had emerged. They stood alongside the wisemen specialising in secular heer rules. Thereafter, both heer and sharia scholars worked together as a judiciary team in order to prevent, manage and resolve the political tensions within the community at large. This is how they conducted the reconciliation process as conflict arose. First, the men versed in secular heer rules sit in shir and deliberate the grievances and the issues to the conflict. After they reach a decision and pronounce the final verdict, the men of sharia step in to complete the matter. The men of sharia solemnise the verdict by reading verses in the holy Quran and praying that such conflict shall not occur again in the community. The mediating role of the men of Islamic sharia was to provide deeper spiritual bindings which the parties involved are expected to abide by. In a nutshell, “together, heer and Islam, in particular, gave the stateless Somalis a rightful political centre of gravity capable of controlling capriciousness, managing intersubjectivity, and offering order and continuity” (Ahmed Samatar 1994:111). Thus, in pre-colonial communal Somalia, this is how effective social stability and political order were maintained. More significantly, the blending of the values and the laws of Islam with that of the native kinship ideology is what gradually matured to “a moral commonwealth or Umma”, the superstructure of the old Somali order in communal Somalia. Ahmed Samatar concludes the debate on how the moral commonwealth governed the social relations of pre-colonial Somali by drawing the following scheme. The charter illustrates the make-up of the constitution of the old Somali order.

53 In Somalia, wisemen are those who embody the great wisdom and excellent erudition of the traditional mechanisms of conflict settlements and whose advice in heer matters is highly regarded.

54 Shir is a Somali word, which literally means assembly. Shir assembly is a forum in which the men of the community gather in order to resolve the burning conflicts.

55 For an interesting and a broad historical account of how the constitution of Umma developed and ordered the social relations of pre-colonial Somali society, see Ahmed Samatar (1994).
Indeed, the analysis here of the dominance of the kinship system in pre-colonial Somalia demonstrates that communal or traditional Somali society does not lack public order but formalised political institutions, simply because “the kin-ordered mode inhibits the institutionalisation of political power, resting essentially upon the management of consensus among clusters of participants” (Wolf 1982:99). However, it was in the absence of this authoritarian structure that the public order was not coercive but essentially moral. As elsewhere, communal Somalia was not without conflicts due to the constraints in the material environment on the land. The frequent droughts, the scarcity of rain, and the competition for the meagre pasture resources such as water and grass were bones of contention and the source of occasional clashes. Particularly, during the periods of drought and dry seasons such tensions were more acute. Fortunately, the moral public order was an effective mechanism of social control for the simple reason that the pastoral production was a communal activity. Put simply, it was a communal activity embedded in social relations of production in which the economic production, political life and culture were all intermeshed (Lyons and Samatar 1995:10). Thus, in pre-colonial Somalia, the prevalence of the communitarian social relations of production is what regulated the competition for the sparse resources and kept in check its concomitant conflicts. In fact, no individual or group dared not to conform to this communitarian social relations of production since the system guaranteed the orderly and the stable production of the pastoral moral economy that was the mainstay of the whole
community. More significantly, the economic production was part and parcel of much wider social relationships.\(^5\)

In brief, throughout the pre-colonial Somali history, the communitarian social order in which individualism has no place is what reigned supreme. Polanyi explains better the nature of this communitarian ethos when he writes that “...man’s economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships. He does not act so as to safeguard his individual interest in the possession of material goods; he acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets” (Polanyi 1944:46). However, in the Somali society, this pre-capitalist communalism did not last forever. As I will explain below, the penetration of the market relations of peripheral capitalism into the subsistence pastoral production has deleteriously transformed the communitarian social order of the Somali society.

3.4. Peripheral Capitalism

The pastoral communal mode of production in Somalia was submerged under the peripheral capitalism in the late 19\(^{th}\) century when the powerful forces of the international market and European imperialism intruded. To put it simply, the imposition of the peripheral capitalism on Somalia has put to an end the dominance of the pre-capitalist communal mode of production. For instance, the impact of the capitalist intrusion changed the subsistence pastoral production from a community-oriented production into a market-oriented commodity.

Britain was the first colonial power to impose its political authority on Somalia in 1886. Initially, British imperial power took over northern Somalia with the objective of appropriating livestock meat to supply its military garrison stationed in the Aden desert. However, in no time, this overseas economic interest considerably commercialised the livestock production in Somalia. From then onwards, the occupation of trade and its attending demands by external markets have become more valuable than that of the meagre subsistence production. For example, the needs of the British colonial state opened up external markets, which stimulated the export of large numbers of herds for the first time in the history of Somalia. And the surplus derived from this expanding livestock trade had deeper impacts on the productive forces of the communal pastoral mode of production, which was the material basis of the kinship system. This is how Ahmed I. Samatar summed up the new age in which the communal pastoral Somali nomads was ushered:

“The precolonial Somali tradition has been blown asunder by its incorporation into the world capitalist system. Livestock and pastoral production, which originally was principally geared for domestic use, has been commoditized, qualitatively transforming precolonial nonexploitive social relations into peripheral capitalist relations” (Ahmed Samatar 1989:154).

\(^5\) Karl Polanyi speaking of the moral economy of communitarian societies like that of early traditional Somali explains that “the individual’s economic interest is rarely paramount, for the community keeps all its members from starving unless it is itself borne down by catastrophe, in which case interests are again threatened collectively, not individually. The maintenance of social ties, on the other hand, is crucial. First, because by disregarding the accepted code of honour, or generosity, the individual cuts himself off from the community and becomes an outcast; second, because, in the long run, all social obligations are reciprocal, and their fulfilment serves also the individual’s give-and-takes interests best”(Polanyi 1944:46).
The commercialisation of livestock production not only heralded the transition to a new mode of production but also to the making of a new social order. Transformationist critics often accuse the traditionalist proponents of failing to grasp the unfolding dynamics of change taking place in the society. According to the transformationist critics, traditionalists often discuss contemporary Somali society as if nothing qualitatively had changed since European imperialism and global market forces penetrated. But the truth of the matter was that the pre-colonial communitarian Somali social relations did not remain unscathed. As Abdi Samatar explains:

“The imposition of colonial rule on stateless societies, the new dynamics of social relations, and the transformation of the pastoral economy are all deemed to be mere quantitative alterations in Somali society rather than fundamental modifications of pre-colonial tradition. By evading the qualitative nature of the changes experienced, the traditionalists are able to avoid systematic analysis of any mutations of the social structures and the governing ethos that might have taken place in the last century” (Abdi Samatar 1992b: 627).  

Before the colonial state intervened in Somalia there were hardly any significant internal or external markets for the livestock production. The demands of both the domestic and Arabian markets were too small. This was confirmed by the available recorded data of the pre-colonial trade in Somalia (Burton 1894; Richard Pankhurst 1965; Abdi Samatar 1989b). Furthermore, the pre-colonial trade pattern in Somalia was not monetised and conducted largely on barter basis. Therefore, it was due to this barter basis that the pre-colonial communitarian production had use-values and not exchange-values. And it was only later and precisely in the era of peripheral capitalism that the logic of the market economy stimulated the Somali pastoral nomads to rear the livestock not only for sustenance but also for external trade. Gradually the livestock trade had become an internal component of the global capitalist economy.

As the livestock trade to external markets increased, commercial transactions between the pastoral nomads in the countryside and the merchants in the coastal towns had intensified. This trading activity was facilitated by the existence of such Somali middlemen as that of Abbaans and Dilaals (guides and brokers). These intermediary natives did not emerge suddenly due to the demands of the global trade; they were already there. The early inception of the Middle Eastern traders in the region had already created such domestic social agents though they remained incipient in nature. Their initial emergence however had a heavy impact upon the pre-existing communitarian (egalitarian) pastoralism as it set in motion a rudimentary social differentiation and individualised private pursuits. According to Ahmed Samatar,

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58 However the immediate impact of the colonial economy on the austere life of the Somali pastoral nomads was deplorable. This is what a British consular in Somalia at the time observed: “in a civilized country, with a settled population employed in the agricultural arts and manufactures, the standard of maternal comfort is associated with advancement, but in a nomadic society it denotes deterioration and a disintegration of those austere qualities requisite for enduring a hard and precarious existence” (quoted in Gesheket 1993:6).
“this new element in Somali society, which encouraged the dilution of kin loyalty and ushered in an attachment to a foreign source of power, would seem to presage latter-day politics of clientalism; and moreover, a modern analyst would probably argue that the Abbaans were the precursors of the links that chain peripheral states of Africa to the ‘tributary system’” (Ahmed Samatar 1988:14-15).

Gradually, the complete induction of the Somali pastoral society into global trade (in the late 19th century) had greatly enhanced the economic power of these intermediate social groups. They also blossomed and matured under colonialism. Thus, in this respect, Ahmed Samatar suggests that Abbaans and Dilaals must be seen to be the precursors of the later petite bourgeoisie. No detailed treatment of how the livestock is commoditised and the pastoral Somali nomads are inducted into the global system is necessary here since it is already widely discussed by the transformationist writers of Somali studies. However, two aspects are worth noting here: (a) the transition from communal moral economy to peripheral capitalism in Somalia had created new interest groups, which could no longer be regulated by kinship relations; and (b) the new fortunes generated through the profits of trade and the benefits from the colonial state resources have undermined the old tradition of collective social obligations and reciprocity (the basis of the communal moral economy of the Somali society) to more individualistic interests and private pursuit. Thus, under peripheral capitalism the rules of merchant capital encouraged competition and individual accumulation and as a result submerged the kinship regulated communitarian production. Furthermore and more importantly the continuity of the tendency towards private pursuit in the economic sphere became altered from communal to individualistic interests. In this respect, the tendency towards private pursuit is time specific as it manifests differently during the pre-colonial and colonial periods.

3.5. The Dominance of the Colonial State

As is evident in the discussion above, the kinship system was dominant when the mode of production was based on use value and the level of development of the Somali pastoral productive forces was very low, hardly beyond subsistence. However when the mode of production expanded as more herds were sold on the international market and the exchange value became prevalent under the era of peripheral capitalism, new productive forces crystallised which necessitated corresponding social relations of production. In this respect, the impact of the colonial state economy reproduced a Somali clan system of a different nature due to the transformation resulting from the traditional economic base.

Initially, these social relations were benign mercantilism. Consequently, the physical imposition of the colonial state as an institution of regulation ended the domination of the kinship system. Yet, kinship relations did not disappear altogether but remained a

59 Transformationist scholars have extensively discussed in numerous publications how the global capitalist system predicated the commoditisation of the subsistence livestock economy, decomposed the pre-colonial social relations of the Somali society and made Somalia a peripheral capitalism. For some important groundbreaking literature of this school see, Ahmed I. Samatar, Socialist Somalia: Rhetoric & Reality, (London: Zed Books, 1988); Abdi Ismail Samatar, The State and Rural Transformation in Northern Somalia 1884-1986, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).
subordinate form of regulation. Although the colonial state was dominant in peripheral capitalism, its control and organisation were more effective in the urban than in the rural areas. For instance, towns and coastal residents were under the regimes and the direct rule of the colonial state, while in the rest of the country, the kinship system known as “native authority” prevailed.

Under mercantilism, the task of the colonial state administration was to ensure the subordinate induction of the livestock economy into global trade. Therefore, maintaining peace and order in the colony was the utmost priority of the colonial state. Particularly, the security issues were what largely preoccupied the British colonial administration in the northern part of Somalia. In this respect, the British Administration undertook two chief functions essential to the material benefits of the colonial government. One was to keep peaceful the coastal towns through which the livestock was shipped to external markets; and the second was to prevent any disturbances that might jeopardise the safety of the caravan routes which link the hinterland to the coastal enclaves. Beyond these two instances that could directly endanger the immediate material needs of the Administration if it was left unprotected the security problems in the rest of the country was not its concern.

Yet there is a widely held claim that colonialism ushered in a period of peace and political stability in Africa. Henry Wilson notes that, “the prime justification for the European partition of Africa had been to maintain pax - peace and stability - where the precolonial rules of Africa were deemed to have failed” (Wilson 1994:16). Some others have also suggested similar viewpoints (see Oliver and Atmore 1977). However, ample evidence in colonial Somalia contradicts this claim. In Somalia, the presence of the colonial state did not only increase conflicts among the Somali clans but also helped its configurations at least in three respects. First, the colonial state played the clans and lineages against each other, perfecting its policy of divide and rule. For example, at any point of time, the loyal headmen and their lineages were armed to defend themselves, to the disadvantage of other lineages that resisted the cooperation with the colonial Administration. And it was through this buying tactic that Somali clans acquired for the first time sophisticated and modern weapons which replaced their simple traditional swords and daggers. More damaging was the easy availability of firearms which had increased raiding as well as the intensity of the violent clashes among the pastoral

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60 This bifurcated and Janus-faced colonial state in which direct rule is enforced as “centralised despotism” and indirect rule as “decentralised despotism” is creatively treated by Mamdani (1996).

61 Somalia and the Somali people had been parcellled by different imperial powers. The northern part of the country came under the British colonial state while Italy colonised the southern part of Somalia. The French colonial state occupied the tiny coastal city of Djibouti. However, this study focuses on British Somaliland in the north and Italian Somaliland in the south of the country. In this section the discussion of the pastoral economic activity that is still the dominant mode of production countrywide, northern Somalia, (the home of animal husbandry) and its occupation by the British colonial state will be central. Southern Somalia is equally important but its agricultural production is small and remains subordinate to animal husbandry.

62 Northern Somalia was a protectorate since it was a territory under British domination but not of settlement. By contrast, southern Somalia was a colony because it was carved to become a proper settlement of Italian population. Robert Hess noted that the Italians residing in Somalia were fewer than one thousand in 1923 (Hess 1966:180). However, in 1931, there were 1,600 settlers which afterwards rose to 8,000 by 1941. Subsequently, nearly two-thirds returned to Italy. And since Somalia fell under the United Nations trusteeship and Italy was a mandated as an administering authority, the number of the Italians in the country has again increased to over 5,000 in 1953. However, since then, as many of them repatriated back to Italy, this number was in a process of a gradual decline. See further, The Economy of the Trust Territory of Somaliland (1957:5).
nomads in the hinterlands far removed from the peaceful enclaves under the colonial state. Furthermore, the competition for access to the colonial state fortunes in the towns and for the provision of more firearms had presented new kind of rivalries between the clans.63

Second, the very presence of the colonial state ignited a new and a different sort of conflict among the Somalis. The colonial Administration was determined to eliminate any group that could challenge its supremacy in the country. In Somalia, the Muslim resistance movement was the only group at the time that resisted the presence of the colonial state. Consequently, in order to subdue and crush the power of the Muslim resistance movement, the colonial Administration armed the loyal clans and lineages to fight against their own Somali countrymen. The intention of this strategy was to use the loyal clans and lineages as buffers, which would protect the security of the tiny colonial Administration against the invasion of the Muslim resistance movement. However, it created a situation in which for the first time in Somali history closely related lineage groups fought against each other on secular and religious lines. In other words, the Somalis started fighting each other in defence of foreign colonial versus national interests. This divide and rule policy served very well the interests of the colonial Administration.

Third and most critical was the war between the Dervish Muslim resistance movement and the colonial state. The long struggles of the Dervish movement (1900-1920) against the colonial domination have been extensively documented so further repetition is not necessary.64 This conflict in Somalia however ushered in decades of destructive militarism and the result was a high human cost for the Somali population. As Charles Geshekter notes, “during the first 36 years of colonial rule (1884-1920), British imperial armies resorted to unprecedented violence and military force (especially after 1899) in efforts to subdue the Somali Dervish movement” (Geshekter 1993:4).

The Italian colonial state in southern Somalia was even more savage because of its fascist practices.65 It was in this way that the colonial state(s) deliberately militarised the Somali clans and plunged them into a situation in which turmoil, instability and destruction prevailed. The point I want to make clear here is that the imposition of the colonial state(s) on Somalia did not bring peace and social stability but on the contrary, it escalated the local conflict by widening the warring configurations. As everywhere in Africa, the rule of the colonial state was based on force despite its variation in degrees. In this case, Somalia was not an exception. However the colonial manpower in Somalia was very small in number and could hardly exert more than a skeletal authority even in towns and coastal enclaves under their direct control let alone the vast hinterland of the

63 “Clans, which until then had regulated access to the means of rural production (land, water, and livestock), now vied for control of resources controlled by others [colonial state]: export licenses; dhow licenses; the right to collect zariba dues and other tolls; and the rights to dig permanent, privately owned wells, buy trucks, open shops, and so forth” (Kapteijn 1994:220-221).


Confronted with such manpower scarcity and security problems in the countryside, the colonial Administration created rural authority or what Mamdani calls “Customary Native Authority in the local state.”67 The colonial Administration in Somalia nominated or hand picked chiefs, lineage headmen and clan elders and was empowered to extend and enforce the degree of the colonial authority in the countryside.68 Yet their appointment was hazardous. According to Lidwien Kapteijns, “the colonial administration, in its desperate search for community leaders, supported one self-styled leader after another---whoever at any point in time either commanded some local authority or could persuade the colonial state that he did” (Kapteijns 1994:221). Indeed, what the colonial administration wanted was a new alternative authority in the interior that could regulate the political economy changes brought about by merchant capital.

In Somalia, the transition of the pre-colonial moral economy69 to peripheral capitalism commoditised the livestock production but it did not transform its basic organisation. In other words, the scarce structural conditions of the pastoral production remained the same. Yet, the profits gained from the external markets and the resources of the colonial administration created greater inequality, which was in great contrast to the egalitarian ethos that prevailed in the pre-colonial moral economy.70 As a consequence, the emerging inequality sharpened the rivalries between clans, lineages and individuals for access to the new wealth and power accumulated in the urban areas. Charles Geshekter relates how some strategically placed lineages benefited from the coloniallly boosted urban economy. He noted that:

“As an external institution, the colonial state concentrated economic opportunities and material resources in places [urban locations] that Somalis feared and despised. The historical basis for the Somali national state was opposite to that of Europe where capitalism first emerged through civic social institutions and where centralised government became a legal instrument to correct inequalities and imbalances. Throughout the colonial period, some sub-clans benefited from the colonial presence because they were better positioned by pre-colonial social arrangements to take advantage of opportunities afforded

66 For instance, as late as 1940, General Sir Archibald Wavell credits the military garrison in British Somaliland with only 14 British officers, 400 African Askaris and 150 African Reservists. See further Supplement to The London Gazette, (5 June 1946)

67 A detailed analysis of the native power at the local state and its contrast with civil power at the center in general in colonial Africa, is documented by Mamdani (1996).

68 “The colonialists saw themselves as paternalist, bureaucratic dictators, yet they relied on creating a class of intermediaries who could effectively intervene in the daily lives of Africans. This meant, in the countryside, the recognition (or creation) of the colonial chiefs whose primary function was to collect taxes and to preserve administrative control” (Freund 1984:137).

69 In Somalia, pre-colonial moral economy was a livelihood activity submerged in communitarian social relations of production.

70 “Differential allocation of shares of social labour can favour the emergence of influential managers; at the same time, contact with other groups can lend importance to persons able to deal with differences of interest and with possible conflict. These tendencies toward inequalities in function are greatly enhanced when kin-ordered groups enter into relationships with tributary or capitalist societies. Such relationships afford opportunities for the seizure and transfer of surpluses beyond those available within the kin-ordered mode” (Wolf 1982:96).
by collaboration" (Geshekter 1997:71).71

Also, well-placed individuals have gained a great deal from the urban economy that existed beyond the sphere of the kin-ordered traditional mode of production and the control of the clans. Particularly livestock merchants colonially paid native authority (aaqils), interpreters, seamen, drivers, cooks, subordinate civil servants, etc. In a nutshell, the political economy of the peripheral capitalism not only resulted in social inequality, fierce competition for access to the economy of the colonial state but more than that it eroded the effectiveness of the rules of kinship.72

3.6. Conclusion

In this chapter I showed how the constraints in the material environment conditioned pastoral nomadism as the primary means of livelihood in Somalia. I also delineated the variable manifestations of the tendency towards private pursuit which advance comprehensive explanations than those hitherto available. As I demonstrated in this chapter, the continuity of these manifestations can be discerned in the social, economic and political spheres of pre-colonial and colonial Somali society. For instance, both schools of Somali studies selectively identify certain elements among the variables of the tendency towards private pursuit. Moreover, I discussed how the several facets of the tendency towards private pursuit are decisive historical processes shaping the Somali social formation in different ways through the ages. Furthermore, I explained how the prevalence of this kin-ordered mode of production perpetuates the survival of clan relations in the Somali society. For this proposition, I challenge the thesis of the traditionalist scholars of Somali studies which claims that primordial blood-ties maintain clan relations in the contemporary Somali society.

In pre-colonial Somalia, the production of the livestock economy was a collective communal enterprise. It was also a subsistence-based economy in which use-value prevailed. This communitarian pastoral economy is embedded in social relations of kinship. Accordingly, the ethos and norms of that kin-ordered system provided mechanisms and social sanctions which have been effective in resolving conflicts among the lineages and clans and also ensured the reproduction of a stable social order.73 Moreover, in pre-colonial Somalia, the constraints in the material environment created a society with a limited development of productive forces and a de-centralised polity. The reason proffered for the lack of advanced social transformation in the Somali society is that the subsistence pastoral existence cannot sustain any social relations of production beyond the kinship system. Or to put it differently, the prevalence of the kin-ordered mode prevents the institutionalisation of political power.

71 For further discussion on this point, see Charles Geshekter (1997).

72 According to Bradbury, “as new forms of wealth accumulated in the [colonial] state, the mandate of political leadership altered from regulating kin relations and entitlement to pastoral resources, to regulating access to the political and economic benefits of the state, thus sowing seeds of disunity and conflict” (Bradbury 1997:5).

73 As Samatar writes, “the household, Islam and the kinship-based political-economic and moral order of pre-colonial Somalia did not prevent conflict between communities, but certainly precluded prolonged hostilities driven by genealogical differences” (Abdi Samatar 1997:694).
By contrast, in colonial Somalia, consequent to the intrusion of the global capitalist system, the mercantilist colonial state replaced kinship order as a mechanism for regulating the social relations of production. Also, the transition from the communal moral economy to the peripheral capitalist mode of production resulted in the domination of the market relations and exchange values. Gradually, the impact of the peripheral capitalism and the market economy transformed the traditional pastoral mode of production and slowly made redundant its corresponding communitarian social order. Moreover, the economy of the colonial state created rivalry and fierce competition between the clans, lineages and interest groups and individuals for its access. This relentless competition then slowly undermined the communal reciprocity and obligations of the Somali society as it reproduced a new social strata not hinged into the traditional pastoral economy. Furthermore, the colonial state policy, which was based on divide and rule added new fuel to of old animosities between the clans and lineages and further militarised the society by providing them with modern firearms. In short, the penetration of colonialism and capitalism in Somalia negatively impacted traditional pastoral socio-political institutions of the society and set the trends for social disunity and individualised private pursuit for the future. The discussion in this chapter will be further continued in chapter five. In that chapter I will discusses how the endemic structural poverty of the domestic economy condemned the post-colonial state of Somalia to subsist on foreign aid and also exacerbated the tendency of individualised private pursuit among the political elite.