

A Cultural Heritage for National Liberation? The Soviet-Somali Historical Expedition, Soviet African Studies, and the Cold War in the Horn of Africa

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This paper discusses the conception, execution, and outcomes of the first Soviet-Somali historical expedition, in 1971. In due course, the Soviet-Somali Expedition set out to create a “usable past” for Somali nationalism, rooted in the history of Mohammad Abdullah Hassan, a religious and military leader who had fought against the British in Somaliland between 1900 and 1920. The paper investigates how Soviet ideas about the preservation of historical heritage were grounded in Central Asian modes of practice and how these became internalised by Soviet Africanists in their attempts to help reinforce foundational myths in newly independent African states. The paper argues that the Soviet model for the preservation of cultural heritage, as envisioned by Soviet Africanists, aimed to reinforce Siad’s national project for Somalia. Their efforts were ultimately unsuccessful, however, because of Cold War constraints and misunderstandings of local realities.

Keywords: Soviet Union, Africa, Somalia, Cold War, Somali cultural heritage, UNESCO

Introduction

On 10 September 1971, Siad Barre, the head of the Somali Revolutionary Council (SRC), spoke to a group of Soviet scholars that had arrived to participate in the first joint Soviet-Somali historico-archeological expedition. “Imperialists always wrote lies about us. They collected such materials that had no value; made photographs of those objects which showed us in the wrong light. Your expedition and research should be cardinally different from what has been written by bourgeois authors. You have to be seekers of truth,” Barre admonished the Soviet members of the team (Gorodnov 1974, 77). The Soviet team had arrived in Somalia in July 1971. The expedition was to be “complex” in its approach in that it comprised a multidisciplinary team, that aimed to study Somalia’s history, economy, and sociology to assist the Somali government in its modernisation goals. The Soviet-Somali expedition, then, sought to use Somali cultural heritage to help Barre’s regime construct a national-revolutionary meta-narrative of history—a “usable past” (Ranger 1976) for a new, modern, and unified Somalia.

The Soviet concept of heritage and its application in the USSR and the peripheries has been extensively studied. After taking power in 1917, the Bolsheviks sought to create their own her-

itage. Thus, they undertook massive projects in re-shaping urban spaces, destroying and creating revolutionary monuments, buildings, and museums (González 2016). The relationship of the Soviet regime with its pre-revolutionary cultural heritage was more complex. Certain monuments were destroyed, but others were “purified” of their capitalist or Orthodox components and appropriated to serve the revolution (Kelly 2012). In Soviet Central Asia, the recovery of Timurid heritage served a particularly important purpose of constructing Kazakhs, Uzbeks, and Tajiks into nations and nationalities (Gorshenina and Tolz 2016). From the 1960s onwards, the Soviets started using spaces like Tashkent as models for revolutionary transformation, which could be applicable to Muslim countries in the Middle East and elsewhere (Strongski 2010). Historians have recently started to explore the ways that Soviet ideas and practices were picked up, emulated, and adapted outside of the USSR. In socialist countries, museums often played a big role in framing the nation’s narrative in Marxist-Leninist terms. In Cuba, museums were designed according to a specific template, designed to replicate a scientific meta-narrative of national history consistent with Marxist-Leninist ideology to remould citizens into New Men (González 2015). However, we know little about the uses of these ideas and practices outside of the socialist bloc.

This paper looks at the planning, execution, and outcomes of the Soviet-Somali expedition of 1971. First, the paper traces the origins of the so-called “complex approach” of the Soviet-Somali expedition, looking at ways in which large excavation and preservation projects were designed in Central Asia. Second, the paper investigates how and why the expedition was envisioned by Sergey Smirnov, the deputy director of the Institute of African Studies (IAS)—in competition with Western dominance over the production of knowledge on Africa. The expedition was delayed until 1971, as an intensification of Soviet-Somali exchange followed Barre’s proclamation of his adherence to socialism in 1969. Third, the paper traces the goals of the expedition, specifically focusing on the way that Soviet historians employed Somalia’s cultural heritage to construct the narrative of a strong, anti-colonialist, and centralised state.

The history of archeological exploration and heritage preservation in the Horn of Africa has long been connected to European colonialism. Prior to the twentieth century, archeological research in the Horn focused entirely on the origins of the formidable Aksum Kingdom in modern-day northern Ethiopia. In the 1930s and 1940s, Italian and British researchers started to explore the numerous Stone-Age sites across Northern Somalia. In 1933, the Italian authorities opened the Garesa Museum in Mogadishu, where they collected artefacts from all around Somalia. In general, the majority of archeological research has been conducted by Western scholars who focused on description and ordering of sites (Brandt and Fattovich, 1990). In contrast, the Soviet-Somali expedition was supposed to chime with the goals of Siad Barre’s nationalist government, to construct a new framework of national cultural heritage, built around the figure of Sayyid Mohammad Abdullah Hassan

and his campaign against the British, 1900-1920. Since the 1990s, Somalia's monuments have fallen into disrepair. While continuous civil war remains a crucial factor, archeologist Sada Mire argues the seeming neglect is due to an incorrect focus on physical objects with no value in a nomadic society (Mire 2011). By looking at the Soviet-Somali expedition, this paper draws attention to the link between the disregard for cultural heritage and the failure of post-war Somali nationalism. The paper is based on archival records of the expedition at the IAS as well as diaries and field notes from participants.

Origins of the “Complex Approach”: Central Asian Expeditions, the Institute of African Studies, and Decolonisation of Africa's Cultural Heritage

Central Asia has played a central role for Russian preservationists and heritage experts since the nineteenth century. In the Russian Empire, efforts at preservation thus focused on the spectacular Timurid monuments of Turkestan as part of a “civilising mission” in the East. These buttressed the status of the Russian Empire as one of the leading European powers. After coming to power in 1917, Bolsheviks also considered preservation to be of utmost importance in soliciting indigenous support for revolution in Central Asia. In 1924, Soviet Central Asia was divided into national republics and corresponding titular nationalities: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. The national delimitation of Central Asia in 1924 was a key moment, when an imperial project of preservation became an ethnocentric one. From then onwards, local elites started to use heritage to build formulations of “national culture” for the titular nationalities (Gorshenina and Tolz 2016). To aid in the process, major Soviet expeditions were dispatched to Central Asian republics excavate and study the ruins of “ancient civilizations”. The expeditions reflected and supported the rise of the autochthonist concept, which interpreted the heritage of all previous epochs as the possession of a particular nationality, thus providing a basis for the 1924 delimitation. These were the so-called “complex expeditions,” which involved historians, philologists, and anthropologists working together—a multidisciplinary approach that aimed to bridge the study of the ancient, medieval, and modern periods (Bustanov 2015).

The biggest and longest-standing of these was the Khorezmian Expedition, directed by Soviet ethnographer Sergey Pavlovich Tolstov. “Khorezm” was an ancient Iranian civilisation that occupied a large oasis in the Amu Darya River in western Central Asia, located in present-day Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. The development of Central Asia had started in the 1930s and gained momentum in the late 1950s and 1960s, not least because the region was to serve as an example of successful socialist development, an actionable model for the Third World (Kalinovsky 2018). Tolstov's recipe for success was to marry scientific research, heritage preservation, and Soviet developmental goals. He became passionate about the idea of restoring water supply to a section of

the Amu Darya River, which had fuelled the Khorezmian civilization in ancient times. Thus, he became involved in the grandiose (and ultimately, unfulfilled) project of supplying water to Central Asia by reversing the flow of the Siberian Rivers (Arzhantseva 2013). In practical terms, Tolstov's "complex approach" included many teams of experts—archeologists, ethnographers, and technical developmental experts—working in Khorezm on their separate tasks. Through the success of the Khorezmian expedition, Tolstov's "complex approach" gained currency in the Soviet academy. Among Soviet academics who worked closely with Tolstov in the 1950s was Ivan Izosemovich Potekhin, one of the founders of Soviet African Studies and the first director of the IAS (1959-1964).

Potekhin believed that the "complex approach" should be one of the organising principles for the IAS. This meant that the institute should be multi-disciplinary, that it should encompass the study of contemporary African economics and society, but also languages and history (Davidson 2003). Potekhin was adamant that the IAS should engage in the study of African history as an anti-imperial and anti-colonial exercise. Soviet historians of Africa were to uncover the "truth about the historical past" of the African people and it was to become a powerful tool to undermine the ideological cover for the "new forms of colonialism" (Potekhin 1961). The lack of primary resources for the new Marxist history of Africa remained a continuous concern for men like Potekhin, who attributed great importance to the study of history at the IAS. Speaking at the meeting of the IAS in 1962, Potekhin admitted that knowledge of Africa was still quite shallow because Soviet researchers almost never did field work in Africa and thus did not possess primary materials of their own; their work was almost exclusively based on materials collected by "bourgeoisie Africanists from imperialist countries" (Transcript of Third IAS Coordination Meeting, 23–24 April 1962).

One of Potekhin's allies at the IAS and a defender of the "complex approach" was Sergey Rufovich Smirnov. A student of the famous linguist and expert in African languages Dmitriy Olderoge, Smirnov was the first to analyse the history of the Mahdist Uprising in Sudan from a Marxist perspective during the defence of his PhD thesis in 1946. He then worked with Tolstov and Potekhin at the Ethnography Institute and became the first head of the History Section at the IAS in 1960 (Davidson 2003b, 152-69). Like Potekhin, Smirnov believed that the IAS should adopt a multi-disciplinary approach and that the study of African history should include experts in various sub-fields, including archaeology. Speaking at the Presidium of the IAS on 12 December 1960, Smirnov proposed the IAS should organise archeological expeditions to Africa to explore the continent's pre-colonial history. Potekhin supported Smirnov's proposal. However, the Soviet Academy of Sciences were sceptical. The Soviet academe lacked expertise and resources in African archeology (Transcript of Presidium Meeting 12 December 1960). In addition, the Soviet leadership wanted the IAS to focus on "practical problems", providing research for various governmental departments. After Potekhin's death in 1964, the focus of the institute shifted to the study of contemporary problems, especially

Africa's economic development. Smirnov remained the head of the History Section at the IAS, however, and continued to defend the importance of historic research (Davidson 2003b). One country that became particularly interesting to him in this regard was Somalia.

The Inception of the Soviet-Somali Expedition and the Cold War in the Horn of Africa

Somalia became an independent country in 1960 as a result of the merger of British Somaliland and the Trust Territory of Somaliland under the premiership of Abdirashid Ali Shermarke of the Somali Youth League (SYL). One of the key objectives of the SYL upon coming to power was unification of what they regarded to be Somali territories—in northern Kenya, French Djibouti, and the Ogaden (eastern Ethiopia)—into “Greater Somalia”. Although the idea originated with the British in 1946, as a way to consolidate their interests in East Africa, by the 1960s, the SYL had firmly adopted “Greater Somalia” as part of their credo (Barnes 2007, 277-91). The new government thus started looking for international support to build up a strong army, capable of one day uniting the Somalis. In 1961, President Shermarke turned to the USSR for military assistance. In 1963, Soviet military assistance to Somalia expanded, as Mogadishu responded to British decision to incorporate the Northern Frontier District, inhabited by ethnic Somalis, into Kenya. This was the moment when Sergey Smirnov arrived in Mogadishu as part of the Soviet-Somali agreement on cultural cooperation. His main aim was to collect documents about the history of Sayyid Mohammed Abdullah Hassan (1856-1920).

Mohammed Abdullah Hassan was the leader of the Somali Dervish movement, who fought, intermittently, with the British for control over northern Somalia between 1900 and 1920. Born in the interior of British Somaliland, he first left for Aden in the 1870s, where he worked as a fireman for one of the steamships. He then travelled to Egypt, where he was apparently inspired by the Mahdist uprising in the Sudan and its leader—Muhammad Ahmad ibn el-Sayed. After performing a hajj to Mecca and joining the Salihyya Sufi order, he returned to Somalia, where he started to preach and established a dervish (Sufi-based) movement. First, Sayyid Hassan mainly targeted the Somalis of the Qadariyah, but as the movement spread, he declared jihad against the British and the Ethiopians and started to attack targets in British Somaliland. The British organised a number of unsuccessful attacks against Sayyid Hassan's forces, but by 1904, he had occupied the Nogal Valley, stretching from Halin in British Somaliland to Ilig on the Indian coast. On 3 March 1905, Sayyid Hassan signed the Iliq agreement with Italy, who, as nominal rulers of southern Somalia, assigned him the territory of the Nogal as a protectorate (Hess, 1964, 422).

Although the Iliq Agreement spared the Dervishes from further attacks from the British for a number of years, Sayyid Hassan continued to battle against regional and internal rivals. In 1909,

Sayyid Hassan's trusted friend and adviser, Abdullah Shahari, defected from the movement and travelled to Mecca, where he obtained a letter from Muhammad Salih, the founder of the Salihyya order, which effectively excommunicated Sayyid Hassan. Although considered a forgery, the letter was damaging to Sayyid Hassan who saw many of his followers leaving the movement. Under renewed Italian pressure, in 1913, Sayyid Hassan moved the basis of operations from Iliq to Taleh—the heart of British Somaliland. By the end of the First World War, Sayyid Hassan's rule had been weakened by Dervishes' infighting in Somaliland and ended in 1920, when the British brought in the Royal Air Force and bombed Taleh (see Figure 1). Faced with superior technology, Sayyid Hassan retreated from Taleh into the Ogaden, dying shortly afterwards from pneumonia (Hess, 1964, 415-433).

By the 1960s, Mohammed Abdullah Hassan had become the key figurehead for SYL's nationalist aspirations. He was considered an independent leader, unwavering in his opposition to British rule. Sayyid Hassan's patrimonial Ogaden lineages and his links to the region also brought legitimacy to nationalist claims to "Greater Somalia". He also became venerated as a man of "great words," lambasting his enemies in ornate classical verse, crucial to the Somali oral tradition, which would form the basis of Somali anti-imperialist cultural heritage. He became a symbol of national unity, transcending "tribal divisions" yet remaining true to Islam. President Shermarke spoke of Sayyid as "a visionary, the father of the modern Somali nation" (Laitin 1979, 95-115).



Figure 1: The aerial view of the Silsilad fortress at Taleh, after the British bombing in 1920. Source: 'Africa Through a Lense', the National Archives UK/Wikimedia Commons

Smirnov's objectives during the 1963 trip to Somalia dovetailed with those of the Somali nationalists. The British were wrong to call Sayyid Hassan a "Mad Mullah," argued Smirnov, who arrived in Mogadishu to collect primary sources on the uprising to "fill in the gaps" in the Soviet literature on the subject and revise the narrative of the campaign, which had been written by Western scholars from an "imperialist point of view." He also wanted to make a trip to Taleh—the centre of Sayyid Mohammed's uprising in Somaliland—where he expected to look at and record the ruins of the military structures erected, before they "fell into ruin." While Smirnov could not make the trip, he managed to organise a meeting with Sheikh Abdurahman, the son of Sayyid Mohammed. According to Smirnov's account, the sheikh was "strongly opposed to cooperation with any English or Italian scientists" but was sympathetic to the USSR. Smirnov and Sheikh Abdurahman met regularly in 1963, with the latter telling Smirnov the latter's version of the war in "great detail." Apparently, he also promised to share his father's archive of valuable correspondence. Smirnov thus recommended that the IAS should organise a joint Soviet-Somali archaeological expedition to trace the history of Sayyid Mohammed's campaign. According to Smirnov, Somali authorities were open to such a plan, and were willing to provide transportation and interpreters (Davidson 2003b, 158-61).

Rivalry with British scholars played a part in Smirnov's justification for the expedition. Smirnov stated that the Soviet acquisition of Somali primary sources would raise the prestige of Soviet African Studies, especially since access to archival documents in Sudan, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Republic was closed off to Soviet researchers. To Smirnov, who had spent most of his professional life analysing the Mahdist Rebellion without access to primary sources, the "find" of primary sources in Somalia must have been exciting, especially given that access to Mahdist files in the Sudan in the mid-1950s, he complained, had been dominated by Peter Holt, a British historian and Head Archivist at that time. The deterioration of Somalia's relations with Britain (in 1963, the Somali government broke relations with the UK and Kenya over the Northern Frontier District) thus offered opportunities for Soviet Africanists to shape the meta-narrative of history for the young republic (Davidson 2003b, 158-61).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) also played a role in Smirnov's calculations. The British-backed UNESCO plan for Somalia, reported Smirnov, included the provision of £220,000 for the construction of a new museum, national library, a building for the archive, and so on. Smirnov worried that UNESCO had apparently already agreed to collaborate with Mogadishu on joint study of historical monuments, ethnography, and oral traditions, with Somali students slated to attend courses in London for scientific research. All of these

measures, reported Smirnov, were backed by the “widely famous” School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS), which had close links to the British Ministry of Foreign Affairs. To Smirnov, there was no doubt that the SOAS- and UNESCO-backed plan for the preservation of Somali heritage was a Trojan Horse for British influence in the region: “In this case we can witness an active British attempt to use scientific contacts for ideological expansion in a country of its political influence. England, France, Belgium, and Italy, all former colonial powers, are actively pursuing such a course of action. The USA are not too far behind” (Davidson 2003b, 161).

Smirnov’s justification for the joint Soviet-Somali expedition was motivated by a desire to increase the academic prestige of IAS. To Smirnov, Somalia’s past and its cultural heritage was to be mined to help establish a counter-narrative to the colonialist and imperialist one. Similarly, unlike Western historians of the early post-independence period, like Basil Davidson, Soviet Africanists were motivated by the search for an “authentic” African past worthy of a new nation (Cooper 1994). As a Marxist-Leninist historian, however, Smirnov wanted sources to establish a credible narrative of anti-colonialist struggle for the new nation. UNESCO had been central to post-war contestations around world history, exemplified by its “History of Mankind” book series, to which the Soviets objected early on. Soviet objections to US hegemony in UNESCO meant they only joined in 1954. In the following years, the Soviets would come to collaborate with the organisation, trying to interject the Marxist-Leninist interpretation of world history into projects such as “History of Mankind” (Betts 2015). In his concern over the role of UNESCO in Somalia, Smirnov clearly expressed Soviet reservations about continuing Western cultural dominance. To Smirnov, Somali cultural heritage were to serve as a building block for a new, “scientific” and Marxist-Leninist history of Africa to break the colonial narratives and forms of domination, now disguised as apolitical UNESCO projects. Soviet-Somali relations cooled down in the following years and the decision on the expedition was delayed for many years. The ideas of the expedition would be revived after a 1969 coup d’etat in Somalia brought to power a new military regime, headed by Siad Barre.

The 1969 Revolution and the Soviet-Somali Expedition

Upon coming to power in 1969, Siad Barre and the SRC announced a program of far-reaching social and economic reforms under the banner of “scientific socialism.” Barre’s economic program included state involvement in the economy and was partly a pragmatic move to raise production in order to raise living standards under centralised management and increase agricultural production to alleviate the consequences of the 1968 drought. In 1970, the government nationalised all foreign banks, petroleum distributors, and the Italian-Somali electric power company. Nonetheless, the ownership of livestock and bananas, Somalia’s main export commodities, remained in pri-

vate hands, and Barre assured businessmen that wholesale nationalisation was not on the government's agenda. Italy remained Somalia's largest trading partner and provided significant support and investment, such as in the establishment of the Somali National Bank and high-value building projects. Other key investors included Iraq, the European Economic Community, and the World Bank.

The early period of economic reforms was also known for the highly publicised "self-help projects," which were crash schemes to mobilise the urban population up to seven hours a week to help construct government-designed schools, classrooms, clinics, hospitals, and libraries (Patman 1990). "Scientific socialism" in Somalia represented a variety of radical African nationalism that attempted to combine ways of state interventionism with an onslaught against the clan-based system and "tribalism" that furthered the dream of "Greater Somalia." The Soviets quickly hailed Siad Barre's coup as "progressive" and were quick to extend assistance to his regime, especially following setbacks in Egypt and Sudan. In addition to \$100,000 in famine relief, Moscow wrote off \$2 million in past debt and offered a \$5.5 million grant to construct oil depots (CIA Intelligence Memorandum, 1971). Barre himself was expected to visit Moscow in November 1971. It was at this critical juncture that the IAS received final approval for the expedition from Mogadishu.

The preceding years were a turbulent period for the IAS. After the death of Ivan Potekhin, debates continued about the purpose of the institute and the role of its History Section. Speaking to the Presidium at a meeting on 4 September 1964, the new director, Vasilii Solodovnikov, argued that the time had come for the IAS to become more engaged in investigations of contemporary African problems, in line with recommendations from the government. As for the History Section, Solodovnikov believed that Soviet Africanists should use original archival materials to appeal to African elites (Transcript of IAS Scientific Council Meeting, 4 September 1964). As the IAS proceeded with the new agenda, criticism of this practical approach was fairly common (Transcript of the IAS Scientific Council Meeting, 28 April 1967, 21). Nonetheless, Solodovnikov insisted the History Section should provide solutions to practical problems: "I believe that historical research have meaning if they give us an answer to contemporary problems and allow [us] to look into the future" (Transcript of the IAS Scientific Council Meeting, 3 July 1970, 93). The 1969 Revolution in Somalia offered opportunities not only to fulfil Smirnov's original plan for conducting research into the history of Sayyid Hassan's movement, but also to show it could make practical recommendations on current issues pertaining to Somali-Soviet relations.

The 1971 programme of the Soviet-Somali "complex historico-archeological expedition" was updated in line with such logic. One part was retained from Smirnov's recommendations: Soviet and Somali historians were to travel to the north of the country to collect documents, oral history data, and other evidence pertaining to the history of Sayyid Mohammed's campaign in northern Somalia. However, the new objective of the expedition was to analyse the "social structure" of Somali

society, alongside a survey of state involvement in the economy. This was to be done by way of a massive survey among various groups, such as university and high school students and factory workers. In terms of outcomes, the expedition was to produce concrete results and advice about the development of Soviet-Somali economic and political cooperation; problems in the work of enterprises built with Soviet assistance; and the conditions for the distribution of publications in the country. The revision of the programme, argued Solodovnikov, was justified because of the “progressive coup in Somali” and new practical tasks in the work of the IAS (Solodovnikov 1971, 13-15). These aims were reflected in the mixed nature of the group, which included several historians (Valentin Gorodnov, Alexander Nikiforov, Petr Kupriyanov), a political scientist (Nikolay Kosukhin), and an economist (Evgenii Sherr). On the Somali side, the expedition included Sheikh Jamaa Umar Issa, a collector of Sayyid Hassan’s poems, and Said Warsame, a Somali archeologist, an alumnus of the Leningrad State University (Solodovnikov 1971, 68-70). Historians and archeologists thus worked mainly in the north, the areas of Sayyid Hassan’s operation, while others engaged in sociological research in the south, around the capital Mogadishu (see Figure 2).

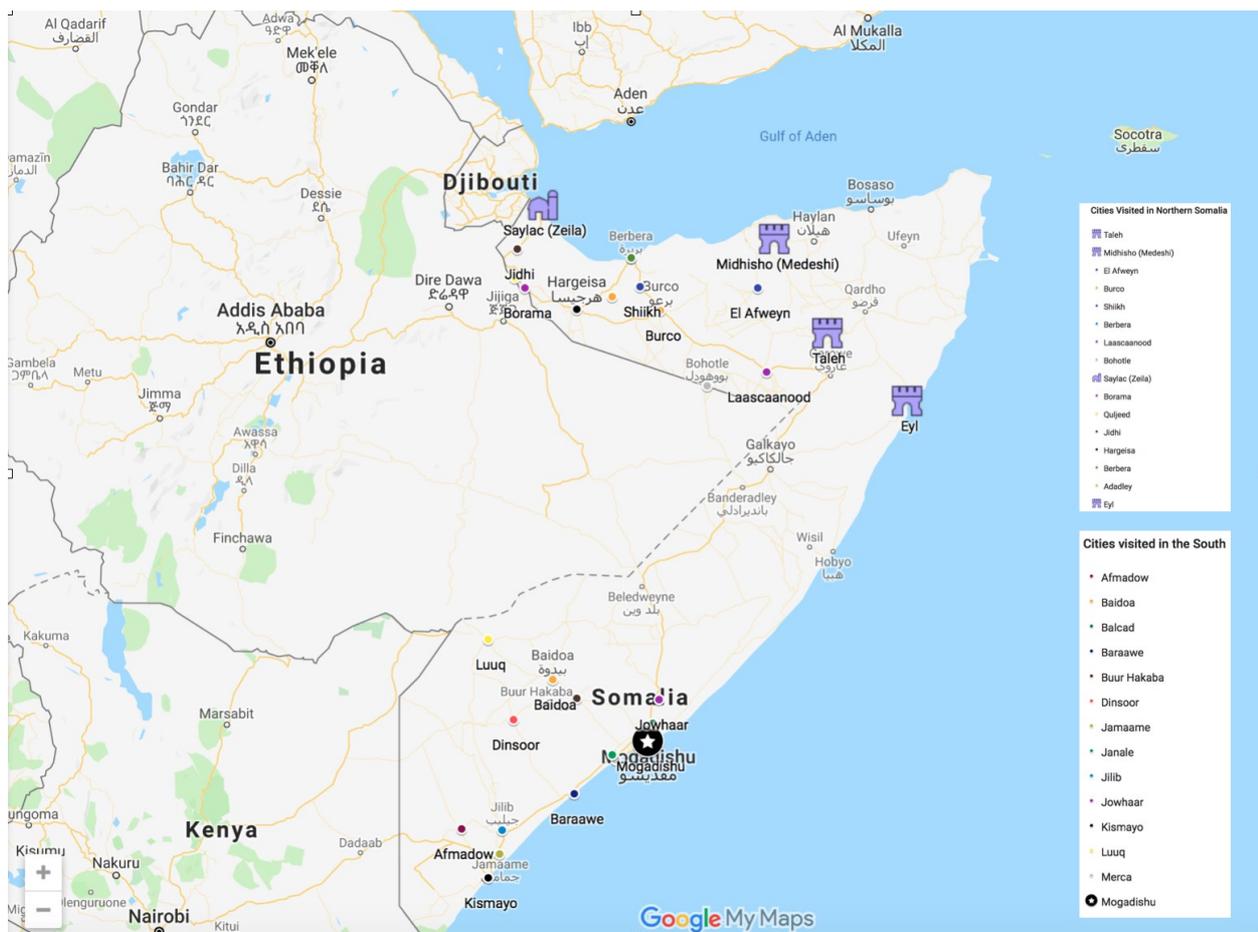


Figure 2. The map of the Horn of Africa. Points in Somalia indicate those locations, covered by the Soviet-Somali expedition. Source: GoogleMyMaps.

The Soviets arrived in Mogadishu on 27 July 1971—the height of Siad Barre’s campaign against “tribalism,” Somalia’s divisive clan system. That year, tribalism was outlawed, with Siad Barre instructing all Somalis to “wage war against tribalism.” The slogan “Tribalism divides – Socialism unites” was continuously repeated in speeches and aired on national radio. The former local lineage village headmen were replaced by elders with the titles of “peace-makers” and the payment of blood money was abolished, with swift fines and prison sentences assigned to those who were deemed to engage in ‘tribalist behaviour’. The word *ex* (clan) was outlawed for its tribalist connotations and replaced with *jalle* (friend, comrade), which was launched into common parlance. The anti-tribalism campaign of 1971 culminated in a mass demonstration and the burning of effigies associated with “tribalism, corruption, nepotism and misrule” (Lewis 2002, 209). Under Siad Barre, the lionisation of Sayyid Hassan’s struggle against the British reached new levels, largely due to his clan affiliation, which linked him and Barre to the Darood clans and thus to the Ogaden. According to the literary scholar Ali Jimale Ahmed, there was a complete “Dervishisation” of Somali historiography under Siad Barre’s regime, with the Sayyid hailed as the hero of the national resistance struggle (Barnes 2006). In the course of their five-month stay, the Soviets attempted to use the heritage of Sayyid Hassan’s struggle against the British as the foundation for Barre’s new Somalia, free of “tribalism.”

The Somali authorities were clear that the goals of the Soviet-Somali expedition had to chime with their modernising agenda, where Sayyid Hassan was to play the role of a unifying figure in a nationalist-revolutionary narrative that connected the Dervishes’ struggle to Siad Barre’s government. That much was clear from a conversation between General Mohamed Ali Samatar, a General in the Somali National Army and a member of Siad Barre’s Supreme Revolutionary Council, and the members of the expedition on 23 August 1971. Like Siad Barre, Samatar argued the goals of the expedition should be practical; they should involve decolonisation of Somali history, which had been “falsified by the colonisers” (Kosukhin 1973). To Samatar, this meant not only writing the history of Sayyid Hassan as a national hero, but also linking him to the revolution of 1969 and to Siad Barre himself. Speaking to the delegation on 25 September, Samatar recommended that the expedition should make a trip to Luuq Ganaane, an old town close to the Somali-Ethiopian border. There, he claimed, the Somalis had fought against the colonisers and the Ethiopians. Sayyid Hassan had also visited Luuq Ganaane, where he wrote a poem about wanting to reach Kismayo, in the south of the country. To Samatar, this was proof that Sayyid Hassan wanted to build a unified state. Most importantly, he continued, it was in Luuq Ganaane that Siad Barre had spent his childhood (Kosukhin 1973).

The explorations of Sayyid Hassan’s history started in Mogadishu. Although Sayyid Hassan’s son Abdurrahman Mohammed Abdullah had died in 1966, thereby depriving the expedition

access to his father's archive, the expedition interviewed the rest of his family resident in the capital—his brother, young son, and grandson. These conversations apparently filled in certain gaps in Sayyid Mohammed's biography. For example, the expedition found out that, Hassan's uprising had only a tentative link to the Mahdist uprising in the Sudan (1881-1899). Unlike the leader of the Mahdists, Muhammad Ahmad, Sayyid Hassan had never proclaimed himself a "*mahdi*" (a religious messiah). He was only a "*sayyid*", which the Soviets defined as "chief, religious leader" (Solodovnikov 1971, 47). This confirmed to the Soviet delegation that he did not want to put himself above his followers. This was not entirely true since the honorific title '*sayyid*' denoted someone who claimed descent from Prophet Mohammed. However, it was an important detail for the Soviet delegation who wanted to establish Sayyid Hassan as the fundamental figure in Somalia's national-revolutionary narrative, rather than a religious leader. The Soviet-Somali expedition sought to strengthen the link between Sayyid Hassan and Siad Barre's revolution, to establish a new, "usable" version of the past for a new, revolutionary Somalia. In his introduction to the volume on the expedition, the Soviet historian Nikolay Kosukhin articulates just such a nationalist-revolutionary meta-narrative:

This information sheds light on the organic connection between the heroic past of the Somali people and the current stage of revolutionary development in the country...The liberation movement under the leadership of Sayyid Mohamed Hassan was one element in a chain of events, connected with the struggle of the Somali people against colonizers and oppressors, which found its clearest expression in the revolution of 21st October 1969. It served as the beginning of liberation from socio-economic backwardness, putting it on par with other countries of socialist orientation. (Kosukhin 1974, 13)

Since the history of Sayyid Hassan's struggle was crucial to the foundational narrative of the Somali state, the expedition focused its investigation in the north, where the Dervishes built a series of forts in their struggle against the British in 1900–1920. Somalia's cultural heritage was to serve as the main symbol for the nationalist-revolutionary narrative.

The focal point for reconnaissance was Taleh, the headquarters for Sayyid Hassan and his army between 1910 and 1915 (see figures 1 and 3). Bombed by the British in 1920, Taleh was home to a number of buildings: a fortress, built as a series of forts in a circle (*Silsilat*), surrounding a collection of tombs; a watch-tower built on a hill (*dar-ilalo*); a house for Sayyid and his family (*Falal*); a hotel tower for guests (*Tale*). Besides, the Taleh ruins contained a large storage space for provisions and armaments and a weapons repair workshop. The Soviet-Somali delegation were not the first to describe the fortifications at Taleh. The Western audience first heard a description of the Taleh forts from William MacFayden, a British geologist and petrologist who mapped the British Somaliland in 1928-1930 (MacFadyen, 1931).



Figure 3. The ruins of the tombs and forts at Taleh. Source: Lieutenant Taylor, R.A . Anglo-Ethiopian Boundry commission, 1930. WikimediaCommons. This picture was similar to what the Soviet-Somali archeological expedition saw in 1971.

However, it was the Soviet-Somali expedition who aimed to construct a nationalist-revolutionary narrative around the Taleh ruins. One key component of statehood was evidence of sedentary agriculture, practiced by the Dervishes around Taleh. During their observations of the Taleh buildings, the expedition ‘discovered’ that the Dervishes had tried to grow grains for the army in the lands surrounding the forts. The Soviets believed that these farming practices of the Dervishes were evidence that Sayyid Hassan was in the process of establishing a unified state. Another included a complex structure of Sayyid Hassan’s army, which had a clear four-tiered hierarchical structure. The formation of the army and the development of agriculture, trade, foreign relations, and the legal system at Taleh—all this showed that Taleh was fundamentally a centre of political life, the “political centre for a young state” (Gorodnov 1974, 32). The ruins of Taleh were thus supposed to embody the Somali state, built around its founder—Sayyid Hassan.

Ruins of other fortifications in northern Somalia only strengthened the notion that Sayyid Hassan aimed to build a unified state. Besides Taleh, the Soviet delegation also investigated and recorded the ruins of Dervishes' constructions at Mereshi (Midhischo) and Eyl. After reconnaissance of ruins in Mereshi, the delegation came to the conclusion that Sayyid Hassan had "grand plans" for that area because of its fertile soil, closeness to the coast and the Gulf of Aden, which gave opportunities to trade with Arab states. At the same time, Mereshi was far enough from the port of Berbera, which was "dominated by the British" at that time (Gorodnov 1974, 34). Another point of interest was *Daarta Sayyidka* Dervish fortress in Eyl (see figure 4).



Figure 4. Daarta Sayyidka Dervish fort in Eyl, Somalia. Source: WikimediaCommons/Ahmed Nune

The Soviet delegation also stressed that the large, two-storey *Daarta Sayyidka Dervish* fortress in an ancient port city of Eyl was never meant to be used for military purposes, but rather as headquarters for Sayyid Hassan between 1904-1910 (Gorodnov 1974, 31). In general, the expedition tried to prove that Sayyid Hassan's fortifications at Taleh, Eyl, Medeshi and others were meant to serve as the cradle for the new state. Sayyid Hassan was thus not simply a rebel leader. He was the father of the Somali nation, who had begun to construct key elements of a nation state, based on sedentary peasant farming. The Dervishes' ruins were meant to embody the nation-state. These

proved the process of ‘detrribalisation’ began under Sayyid Hassan and, by implication, that Siad Barre continued this process.

Somalia’s medieval cultural heritage was also to serve the new nation. In November, Nikiforov and the Soviet-trained archeologist Said Warsame visited several sites related to the history of the *Adal Sultonte* (Kingdom of Adal), which had reached its peak between 1415 and 1577. One of the most important sites was Zeila (Saylac), a town close to the border between Somalia and Djibouti (see Figure 1). During the Middle Ages, Zeila was an important port town and the centre of the Muslim Adal Sultanate, containing a number of mosques (see Figure 5). When Nikiforov and Warsaw arrived at Zeila on 17 November however, they found the city in ruins: the city has lost significance after the rise of Beira; and many of its inhabitants had simply left, many crossing over to the French Djibouti. As a result, the city could never be fully restored. “One of the most unique historical architectural heritage sites of Somalia is almost completely lost for the next generation and represents a point of interest only from an archeological point of view”, lamented Nikiforov in his diary (Kosukhin 1973, 195).



Figure 5. Ruins of a medieval mosque in Zeila (Saylac), 2010. Source: WikimediaCommons (Photo: Walter Callens). The Soviet delegation reproduced the same mosque in their publications (Warsame, Nikiforov and Galkin 1974, 326)

The following day, Nikiforov and Warsame took a boat to the Sa'adin (Sacadin) island. Located only two miles from Zeila, Sa'adin also used to be important ancient site for trade, where

Eastern African slaves, ivory, and glassware were exchanged for goods coming from all over the world, including Chinese porcelain (Kosukhin 1973, 195-6). Nikiforov and Warsame found the island in ruins, with pieces of Chinese porcelain scattered around the island providing evidence of its 'glorious past'. While neither Zeila nor Sa'adin could be restored, both should be subject to a detailed archeological survey as a rich source of materials for the study of the Somalian coast (Kosukhin 1973, 196). Such archeological study had important political meaning. As Nikiforov and Warsame argued, the study of the Adal Period could be used by the young Somali Democratic Republic in building national consciousness and eradicating the "worst aftermath of colonialism—tribalism" (Warsame, Nikiforov and Galkin 1974, 319).

While Sayyid Hassan's struggle represented a good foundation for modern statehood, research into various aspects of society showed that there were still many obstacles to socialist transformation in Somalia. Nikolay Kosukhin, who conducted the sociological surveys together with economist Evgeniy Sherr, complained that they had placed the surveys in the local newspaper twice, but only received five answers. Using Marxist analysis, Kupriyanov recorded a process of "class differentiation" among sedentary peasants, but many of them had not yet felt any positive outcomes from the 1969 revolution. Capitalist exploitation still dominated village life, with harsh working conditions and low wages. In his study of the Somali nomads, Alexander Nikiforov reported that many nomads would be willing to settle down as agriculturalists. However, climatic conditions and lack of arable land require high levels of state-funded investment. While the movement towards sedentary life was central to any modernisation project in Somalia, any "hasty measures" in this regard would lead to "dangerous tensions" in the country (Individual Reports 1971, 57). While the Soviets were extremely cautious about the sedentisation of the Somali nomads, they believed without a doubt that agriculture was superior to a nomadic lifestyle on the scale of human civilisation and associated the former with statehood. A very similar set of beliefs with regard to Central Asia had not only led to crash sedentisation of nomads, but also to the archeological search to prove an ancient urban and agricultural heritage for peoples of the region (Bustanov 2015, 61).

The main recommendation of the Soviet expedition was to entrench the nationalist-revolutionary narrative of Sayyid Hassan and Somalia's struggle in a museum. According to Nikiforov and Gorodnov's popular account of their expedition, "A Trip to Taleh", the expedition made a number of recommendations to codify the memory of Sayyid Mohammed. One of them was the construction of a museum dedicated to Sayyid Mohammed and the national-liberation struggle (Nikiforov 1976, 143). While we don't know to what extent the Soviet recommendations indeed lay behind the decision, such a statue of Sayyid Hassan was indeed erected in Mogadishu in the 1980s. Constructed in socialist realist style, the monument depicts Sayyid Hassan sitting on his horse atop the Silsilat fortress (see Figure 6). The monument was decorated with murals, representing Somalis' struggle

against colonialism. By visually reconstructing the Taleh ruins, Siad Barre aimed to establish a new symbol for his nationalist-revolutionary paradigm.



Figure 6. Monument to Sayyid Hassan' in Mogadishu atop the Taleh fortres (1980s). The statue of Sayyid Hassan was subsequently removed in the 1990s. Source: Alamy

UNESCO and New Approaches to the Preservation of Somali Cultural Heritage

The prospects for long-term Soviet-Somali cooperation in cultural heritage preservation initially seemed bright. Writing up the summary of their research project, Kosukhin stated that the expedition involved the Somalis in the process of “reconstructing the heroic past” and contributed to the “development of its national consciousness” (Kosukhin 1974, 10). Moscow approved plans to make the expedition a permanent joint venture; and two members of the Soviet team went back to Somalia for a follow-up trip in 1973. These prospects of further cooperation must have seemed all the more practicable when in 1974, both sides signed a Soviet-Somali Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, under which the Soviets supplied military aid to Mogadishu, while the Soviets gained access to the port of Berbera and Mogadishu. However, these were not to materialise because of developments in the Horn of Africa.

In June 1974, Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia was toppled in a popular revolt, led by the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), otherwise known as Derg. Run by a group

junior military officers with Marxist-Leninist views, the Derg quickly launched a program of socio-economic reforms and sought support from the socialist countries. Almost immediately, the Derg faced opposition local power holders, left-wing dissenters, and irredentist groups. Ethiopia's instability emboldened Siad Barre to fulfil the dream of "Greater Somalia" and stepped up support for irredentist movement in the Ogaden. In July 1977, the Somali National Army crossed into the Ogaden, launching the Ogaden War between Somalia and Ethiopia. Although the Soviets first tried to balance between the two sides, faced with the prospect of Ethiopia's defeat, Moscow threw massive military support behind the Derg. In November 1977, Siad Barre broke relations with the Soviets and Cuba (Westad 2005, 250-288). After Somalia's defeat in the Ogaden War in 1978, the Soviet Union remained a close ally of Ethiopia and lost its positions in Somalia. Although the defeat in the Ogaden War greatly weakened Siad Barre's regime, he remained in power up until 1991 when he was finally ousted in a coup d'état. The prospects of further Soviet-Somali cooperation thus came to an end in 1977.

However, UNESCO work in Somalia continued to follow at least some of the goals of the Soviet-Somali expedition. The emphasis of UNESCO activities in the realm of cultural heritage had always been on museums. The focus was the famous Garesa museum in Mogadishu, one of the oldest museums in Tropical Africa, boasting a collection of 3,000 artefacts from all over Somali territory. A string of UNESCO officials in 1966, 1976, and 1978 had written up detailed reports and recommendations for the improvement of facilities at the Garesa museum. After a trip to Somalia in September 1976, Dr. Nazimuddin Ahmed from Pakistan advised the establishment of an Antiquities Service and the building of a new museum to host Garesa's artefacts (Ahmed, 1977). Siad Barre's regime was not particularly interested in Garesa, which, to them, was a relic of the country's colonial past. As a result, the government continuously ignored suggestions for the preservations of artefacts at Garesa, which has been subject to substantial looting (Mire 2011). Instead, they were interested in establishing a new cultural heritage for their revolution.

UNESCO officials recognised these limitations and tried to adapt them to the needs of Somali nation-building. In a report for UNESCO from 1979, the Africanist archeologist Merrick Posnansky lamented the fact the public paid little attention to the work of the museum and that there was little effort to use the museum as an instrument of nation building. Well aware that the government was engaged in constructing a "museum of revolution," Posnansky tried to pitch his view that the restoration of the Garesa Museum and preservation of its artefacts could contribute to the goal of nation-building:

The potential of a museum is grasped in the Museum of the Revolution currently being arranged in Mogadiscio, but a dynamic approach to the museum still has to be realised. Museums should preserve all the important objects of today—the broadsheets of Revolution, pho-

tographs of wall slogans, tools used to initiate projects, breakthroughs in intermediate technology such as the looms or agriculture implements. All will be treasured by tomorrow's generation (Posnansky 1979, 6).

The Somali government indeed built a “National Museum” as part of the Mogadishu cultural centre in 1987. It was a four-storied building with four exhibition floors, adjoining a four-storied building for technical and administrative offices. The exhibition rooms formed the shape of an oval ring, with a concentric corridor outside. According to a 1988 UNESCO report, the building of the National Museum was a substantial achievement, through which one could “sponsor national identity and knowledge of the past threatened with disappearance due to the growing acculturation process” (Crespo-Toral 1988, 3). Here again, UNESCO believed the construction of the museum was crucial to the identity of the Somali nation—an objective with similar underlying goals to the Soviet-Somali expedition, albeit deprived of its specific ideological content.

Since the late 1990s, Somalia's cultural heritage has fallen into oblivion. The main reason has been the ongoing civil war. Although the full extent of damage, especially to Somalia's Stone Age sites is difficult to ascertain, many northern cities such as Erigaabo, Burao and Hargeisa, including its museum, have been destroyed (Brandt and Mohammed, 1996). The museums and cultural sites of Mogadishu have also been severely damaged and looted. In an influential piece, Sada Mire has also argued that the destruction of tangible cultural heritage fundamentally lies in the values of Somali society. What Western experts failed to realise, argued Mire, is that the Somalis' understanding of culture and cultural heritage focused not on preserving objects, useless in nomadic life, but of knowledge and skills, transmitted orally from one generation to the next. Therefore, any efforts at heritage protection in Somalia should be focused on the preservation of oral heritage rather than physical objects (Mire 2011).

The story of the Soviet-Somali expedition and cultural mission of UNESCO in Somalia shows that these efforts were shaped by similar modernising assumptions that prioritised the writing down and museumification of Somali history. The politics of cultural heritage in Somalia was closely connected to Somalia's nationalism. While the Somali government did neglect objects that were connected to the colonial past, they tried to use selective cultural heritage to construct a new foundational myth for the Somali state. The failure of that narrowly defined nationalist project does much to explain the failure to establish a new framework for Somalia's cultural heritage. Mire's concept of a “knowledge-based” cultural heritage is now entrenched in UNESCO's recommendations for Somalia. In Somalia, UNESCO is now concerned no longer with museums, but with preserving and promoting an intangible heritage and community-based initiatives to promote peace building (Padilla and Trigo-Arana 2013).

Conclusions

The story of the joint expedition gives us an insight into the ways that the Soviets tried to apply their ideas and practices of cultural heritage in the context of post-independent Somalia. As Marxists-Leninists, the Soviets saw the world in terms of stages of development, with history evolving in stages, hurried along by a revolutionary vanguard. From this perspective, national development, with all of its gimmicks—national culture, heroes, myths, and heritage—was central to development of a nation. In Central Asia, the Soviets had engaged in active nation-building projects, with Timurid heritage acting as one of the crucial building blocks for the new Muslim Republics. In Somalia, Soviet Africanists acted to recreate the required template, as they sought to reinvent Somali cultural heritage in a Marxist-Leninist vein. This included the narrative of a Somali nation as a series of struggles against foreign invaders, culminating in the victory of Siad Barre's revolutionary regime. Sayyid Hassan was a central figure in that narrative, as he played a crucial role in the nationalist-revolutionary meta-narrative for the new nation. That is why the Soviets encouraged the codification and museumification of a narrative of “national-liberation struggle” not unlike what was undertaken in Cuba and other socialist countries. These aims coincided with those of Siad Barre's regime, which was in the process of constructing a new state built on a selective reading of Somalia's history.

Many of the ideas and practices of the Soviet Africanists had practical antecedents in “complex” multi-disciplinary expeditions in Central Asia. These included the prioritisation of towns over the countryside, of agriculture over nomadism. To the Soviets, the cultural heritage of Dervishes in Taleh became a particularly important site of nation-building as it contained evidence of Sayyid Hassan as a national and anti-colonial leader. As in Central Asia, Somalia's medieval cultural heritage—centred around the mythology of the Adal Kingdom—also had to be connected to the contemporary history of Somalia. The ultimate goal of the Soviet-Somali expedition was to aid the economic development and modernisation of Somalia. Hence, it is unsurprising that it was a multi-disciplinary expedition, engaged in a multitude of practical developmental tasks. With the transformation of the IAS into an institute for the solution of practical problems, its staff used some of the methods adopted by Tolstov in Khorezm to marry Soviet goals in Somalia with their desire to raise the prestige of Soviet African Studies.

Barre's revisionist reading of what constituted a Somali nation ultimately led to a bloody and costly war with Ethiopia and a break with the Soviets. However, the fundamental nation-building ethos of the Soviet-Somali cultural expedition remained the central focus of Western experts, including those from UNESCO. Much more research needs to be done into the design, objectives, and outcomes of Somalia's National Museum, established in the 1980s. This may provide useful insights into the evolution of Siad Barre's regime and Somalia's official nationalism. The oblivion and destruction of “revolutionary” heritage associated with Siad Barre such as the national museum and the

monument to Sayyid Hassan are at least partial testament to the failure of Barre's nationalist project. Sada Mire's "knowledge-based" approach provides the best prospect of community-based reconciliation in the region. The reconstruction and preservation of Somalia's "tangible" cultural heritage may have to wait for the recovery of a stronger state.

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