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Popular Islam limits of secular state on the Somali penisula

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2019

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/28380

Muhumed, Abdirizak Aden (2019) Popular Islam and limits of a secular state in the Somali Peninsula, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://hdl.handle.net/10539/28380>

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Abstract

Somalia has been described as a "state without a state" or a "nation in search of state" since the end of colonial rule and the subsequent total collapse of the postcolonial state in 1991 (Samatar and Laitin, 1989, Newman, 2009, Menkhaus, 2003). Scholars have been attempting to locate the source of the conflict and ways of reconstructing the Somali state, describing the Horn of Africa nation not only as an archetype of a failed state, but also a threat to regional and global security. Since the arrival of European invaders, Somalia's inhabitants have routinely been referred to as the most "difficult race to pacify" (Beech, 1996:5). The repetition of these colonial tropes which are consistently reported in the contemporary literature on Somalia is not surprising because of two consistent elements in the Somali conflict which ought to be probably understood. First, the population's strong attachment to Islam has resulted in the country's historical transformation into indigenous political Islam, a phenomenon that is "downplayed and understudied," in the historiographic accounts of Somalia (Abdullahi, 2011:16). In this vein, I argue that the forced secularisation of Somalia, from the colonial era to the current attempts to create a secular state, has been at loggerheads with popular indigenous Islam in this Horn of Africa nation. This popular Islam attracts the presence of a global force that has been attempting to steer Somalia away from its indigenous identity to a more secular notion of the state. Arising from these hypotheses, the dissertation aims to establish the continuities between Somalia's current political instability, its past and political loyalty, by exploring Islam as both an ethnicised identity and defence mechanism. While investigating the role of Islam in shaping the social and political Somali identity, I historicise Ahmad Gurey's war with Abyssinia and the Portuguese empire in 1500s, and Sayid Maxamad's confrontations with colonial powers: Britain, France, Italy and Abyssinia in 1900. Finally, I explore the tension between the formation of the secular postcolonial state and indigenous Islam. The research attempts to trace the present turmoil and investigate the role of popular Islam in "inviting" foreign powers to the Somali peninsula, thus arresting the process of domestic state reconstruction