
Atrocious Misery: The African Origins of Famine in Northern Somalia, 1839–1884

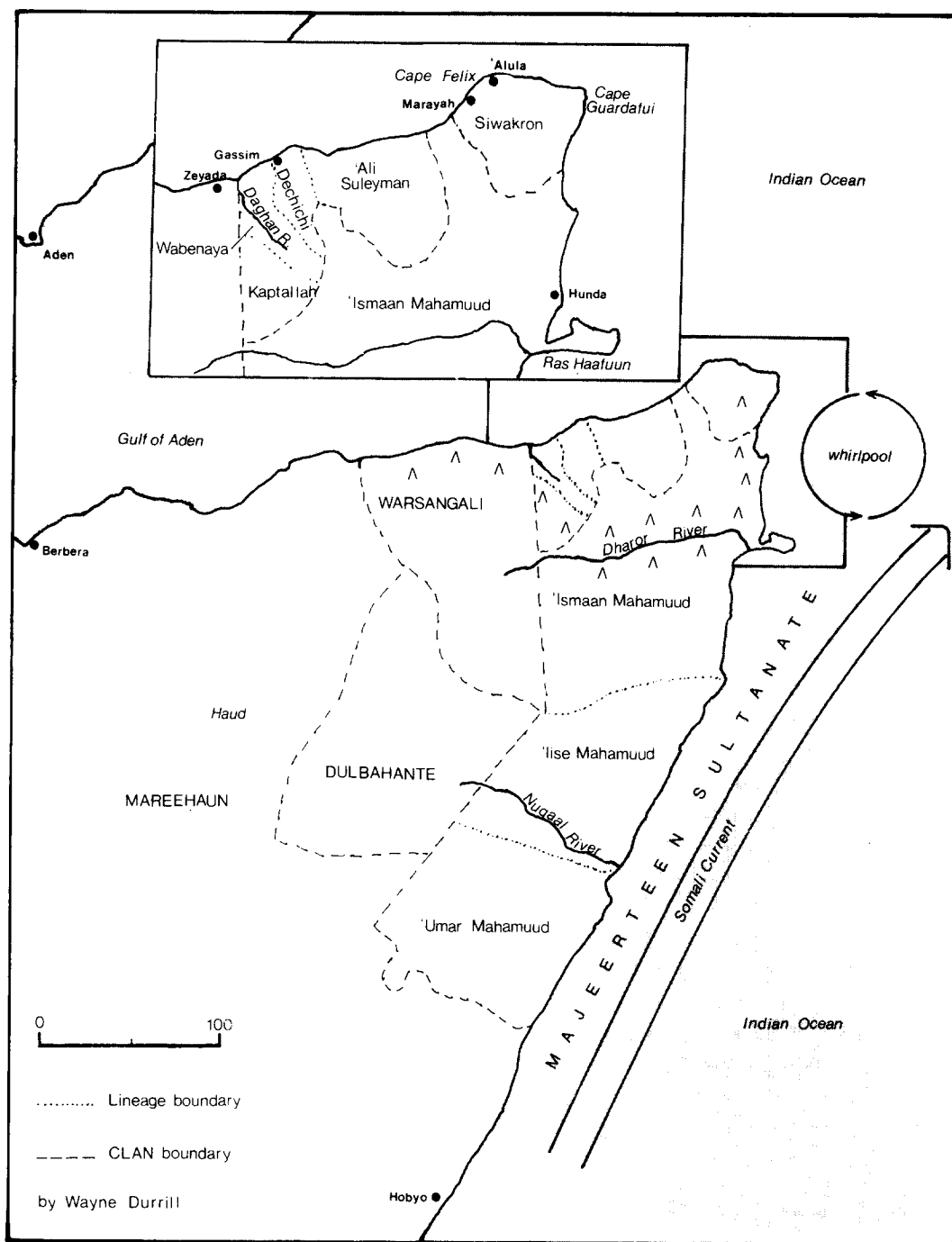
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ON JUNE 7, 1801, AN EAST INDIA COMPANY FRIGATE, the *Weisshelm*, sailing from India to Egypt, approached Africa's east coast near the Horn. When, at seven in the evening, the ship drifted close to the rocky shore, it foundered, broke in two, and lodged between two boulders. The next morning, the *Weisshelm* survivors found themselves on a beach surrounded by perhaps twenty Africans "armed, some with matchlocks, and some with bows and arrows, but all carried a large knife like a *sahre*, and pike." The Africans stripped the castaways of their clothing and other possessions. They also removed silver bracelets from the officers' Indian servants by first cutting off their arms. Toward sunset, a local chief approached the beach with more soldiers. He spoke awhile with his men, then formed them into a line, and ordered the warriors to brandish their weapons at the Europeans "as if they were going to kill" them. The *Weisshelm*'s survivors made a dash for some nearby hills. Those "who could not run fast enough, or were wounded by [the Africans'] shots, were immediately butchered, as soon as overtaken." Those who escaped were rescued some weeks later by a British brig-of-war that became becalmed close to the Somali shore.¹

The *Weisshelm*'s crew and passengers were stranded near a promontory called Ras Haafluun in what is now northern Somalia. Their experience was not unique. They ran afoul of the Majeerteen, a group infamous among European sailors for their fearsome treatment of castaways. The Majeerteen alone among Africans systematically scavenged among the shipwrecks that regularly littered their shores. These wrecks were caused by strong currents that swept northward in July and August at seven to eight knots off the Somali south coast. The currents flowed northeast to Ras Haafluun where they turned directly east, forming on the

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¹ *Narrative: Portenger's Shipwreck in the Red Sea* (n.p., n.d.), 3–24. I used the copy, which was bound as a pamphlet, at the Duke University Library, Durham, North Carolina. Somalia only recently adopted a standard orthography for its language, and that guide has not yet been translated into English. Therefore, I have followed the orthography used by Said Samatar in his recent work on northern Somalia, including his modifications for the convenience of English readers. I could not find a few words, especially place names, rendered in the new orthography. In such cases, I have retained spellings found in nineteenth-century sources. Said S. Samatar, *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism: The Case of Sayyid Mahammad 'Abdille' Hasan* (New York, 1982), viii.



MAP: Horn of Africa, Mid-Nineteenth Century.

SOURCES: I. M. Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa: Somali, Afar, and Saho* (London, 1955); George Revoil, *La Vallée du Darghar* (Paris, 1882); L. Bricchetti Robecchi, "Da Obbia ad Allula," *Bullettino della Società Geografica Italiana*, ser. 3, vol. 4 (1891); and Giovanni de Agostini, *La Migiurtina ed il Territorio del Nogal* (Turin, 1926?).

currents' backside an enormous whirlpool rotating counterclockwise toward the shore. Ships caught in the whirlpool were carried westward to the rocky coast between Ras Haafluun and 'Alula on the point of the Horn.²

By 1800 the Majeerteen confidently expected two or three European ships to be wrecked on their shores each season. When that happened, nearby residents converged on the site, chased away the survivors, and looted the vessel. As early as 1800, booty provided the means by which local Majeerteen chiefs assured themselves of political power. They supervised the sale of loot in Arabia and distributed half of the proceeds to their kinsmen—now clients—thus creating obligations that could be exchanged later for rights in labor, water, and the use of pastures. By about 1840, however, that patronage and wealth had become concentrated in the hands of a single lineage of herders, the 'Ismaan Maḥamuud, who organized the sole sultanate among the northern Somali. So important did shipwrecks become to the sultanate that in 1878 an American visitor among the Majeerteen reported: "A priest is stationed in the mountains near Cape Guardafui who prays day and night that God will drive Christian vessels ashore that they may plunder them! This was told me by the Chief of Hunda who regarded it as a very prudent, proper and pious precaution—he thinking I was a Moslem."³

Booty from shipwrecks and the patronage it generated transformed the Majeerteen political economy. In the early nineteenth century, Majeerteen herders and fishermen organized themselves into small local groups that produced a subsistence, if little else, despite a scarcity of natural resources. The mobility of the herders enabled them to exploit pastures over a wide area and to harvest gum for sale, which tided them over the dry season. They also developed an interdependent relationship with coastal peoples whose labor shortages often complimented the herders' labor surpluses. Finally, the Majeerteen practiced conservation in times of drought. In each of these strategies, the Majeerteen recognized the limitations of their resources. They used their knowledge of the country and deployed the labor they controlled to take best advantage of what the region had to offer. In consequence, when the rains failed, no one died of

² J. G. Bruce, "Somali Current: Recent Measurements during the Southwest Monsoon," *Science*, July 1, 1977, pp. 51–53; and Friedrich Schott, "Monsoon Response of the Somali Current and Associated Upwelling," *Progress in Oceanography*, 12 (1983): 357–81. For information on the frequency of wrecks on the Majeerteen shores, see F. M. Hunter, *An Account of the British Settlement of Aden in Arabia* (1877; reprint edn., London, 1968). Hunter recorded seven British shipwrecks on the Majeerteen coast between June 1870 and July 1874. A rate of two shipwrecks per year coincides with a report by Charles Graves, whom Khedive Ismaa'il assigned to lead a naval expedition to survey the Somali coast. In 1878, villagers near Cape Guardafui told him that they "confidently expect[ed] two or three steamers to be wrecked this summer." Charles Graves to Chichi Graves [his wife], May 22, 1878, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, Southern Historical Collection, Charles I. Graves Papers (hereafter, Graves Papers), p. 32; and Hunter, *Account of the British Settlement of Aden*, 178–80. Graves wrote this forty-page letter as rough notes for a report that he later sent to the Egyptian army. I used a typescript on microfilm of Graves's letter, which has page numbers added. The original letter is also available in the Southern Historical Collection. On Graves's report, see Pierre Crabitès, *Ismail: The Malignant Khedive* (London, 1933), 140, and *Americans in the Egyptian Army* (London, 1938), 230. For information on the Graves papers, see Wayne K. Durrill, "African Papers in the Southern Historical Collection, The University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill," *History in Africa: A Journal of Method*, 7 (1980): 337–42.

³ Charles Graves to Chichi Graves, May 22, 1878, Graves Papers, p. 21.

starvation, and no general warfare ensued. After 1840, the 'Ismaan sultanate, however, sought profit, not merely subsistence, through its participation in an overseas commodities market. A new regional political structure built out of patronage and derived from the distribution of loot from shipwrecks enabled the 'Ismaan Maḥamuud clan to alter local production and to expand Majeerteen trade. This political economy produced an unequal but rising prosperity for most Majeerteen people, hence a constituency for 'Ismaan rule and for trade in external markets. But the 'Ismaan sultanate's policies also transformed periodic regional droughts from manageable hardships into catastrophic famines.

IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, the Majeerteen clan occupied a rocky, semidesert territory on the Horn of Africa, a strip of land perhaps one hundred fifty miles wide and four hundred miles long. The Majeerteen numbered twenty to thirty thousand persons, divided among three major lineages—the 'Ismaan Maḥamuud in the north, the 'Iise Maḥamuud in the middle, and the 'Umar Maḥamuud in the south. The Majeerteen also permitted two distantly related lineages to live in their midst—the Siwakron and the 'Ali Suleymaan, both of which resided near Cape Guardafui along the northern part of the coast where shipwrecks occurred.⁴ The Warsangali, Ḍulbahante, and Mareehaun clans occupied areas west and south of the Majeerteen country. Those three clans plus the Majeerteen formed the Harti clan confederation.

Majeerteen clansmen claimed membership in two basic social groups—a family and a sublineage. A sublineage was a mag-paying group, that is, a group that collected a portion—mag—from each member's annual produce for common use by the sublineage. Sublineages formed the Majeerteen's fundamental political units. Each sublineage consisted of several patrilineally related families that together took responsibility for all the actions of the sublineage's members. In the event of transgression or dispute within or without the group, sublineage leaders negotiated a settlement with the wronged party or, failing that, engaged in a blood feud. A European traveler, however, reported that "blood feuds are infrequent, commutation by fine generally being preferred, and are carefully avoided if possible." To pay such indemnities, the group pooled the mags collected from each member. Families formed the Majeerteen's basic economic units. Women brought property to a marriage, usually a dowry of one hundred fifty Maria Theresa dollars, large palm mats used to build a hut, and furnishings. Men brought their alliances with other men in the Majeerteen's patrilineal kin system, hence, access

⁴ Charles J. Cruttenden, "Report on the Mijjertheyn Tribe of Somallies, inhabiting the district forming the North-East point of Africa," *Transactions of the Bombay Geographical Society*, 7 (1844–46): 116. On the settlement of the Horn, see David Hamilton, "Imperialism Ancient and Modern: A Study of British Attitudes to the Claims to Sovereignty to the Northern Somali Coastline," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 5 (1967): 11; I. M. Lewis, "The Somali Conquest of the Horn of Africa," *Journal of African History*, 1 (1960): 213–29; and Mohamed Nuuh Ali, "A Linguistic Outline of Early Somali History," *Ufahamu*, 12 (1983): 234–42. For an appraisal of studies on early Somali history, see Herbert S. Lewis, "The Origins of the Galla and Somali," *Journal of African History*, 7 (1966): 27–46; and Lee V. Cassanelli, *The Shaping of Somali Society: Reconstructing the History of a Pastoral People, 1600–1900* (Philadelphia, 1982), 28–37.

to livestock, wells, pastures, protection, and relief in hard times. Men and women labored in complementary occupations. Wives reared children, cooked, fetched wood and water, and tended livestock close to home. Husbands herded livestock miles away, hunted, collected gum, defended control of pastures and wells, and traded with coastal merchants. Husbands controlled the disposition of resources and labor. Intransigent wives found themselves quickly and easily divorced and returned to their fathers' homes.

Each Majeerteen person also claimed rights and protection from his own lineage, clan, and clan confederation, each of which served mainly as an intermediary among contentious clansmen. Herding lineages defined and defended their members' pasturing rights against claims lodged by competing lineages. Coastal lineages controlled access to export markets and provided an *abbaans* (protector) for Indian and Arab merchants, who dominated the export trade in the early nineteenth century. At a higher level, the Majeerteen clan mediated disputes among its own lineages in a council of elders that met each year. And the Harti clan confederation circulated women and their dowries among the four clans. In short, power lay in the hands of local leaders—family heads and sublineage chiefs. Only in exceptional circumstances did the lineage, clan, or clan confederation wield any influence in the Majeerteen country.⁵

Before 1839, local Majeerteen leaders directed distinctly local economies in which each Majeerteen family produced a modest but adequate living from scanty natural resources scattered among three distinct ecological zones. Limestone hills and plains in the interior formed one zone. These dry uplands, the Haud, produced enough grass to support camels and goats but little else. The largest of the plains lay in the Dharor Valley, ordinarily occupied by 'Ismaan herders. Rugged marble hills and cliffs that paralleled the coast formed a second zone. Rock crevices there provided a unique micro-environment for acacia trees from which Majeerteen herders harvested gum arabic and frankincense in the dry season. Finally, the sea and its shore formed a third area that offered a better, though still limited, variety of natural resources—fish from the ocean, a fruit stone used to make coarse bread, wild palm trees that produced dates and palm leaves used to make matting, and grassy uplands that fed scattered herds of both domestic livestock and wild game, especially antelope.⁶

⁵ Cruttenden, "Report on the Mijjertheyn," 118–21. There are no scholarly studies of either the Majeerteen or their history. Several works on other Somali clans, however, cover the northern region of the Horn. See I. M. Lewis, *A Pastoral Democracy: A Study of Pastoralism and Politics among the Northern Somali of the Horn of Africa* (London, 1961), *Marriage and the Family in Northern Somaliland* (Kampala, Uganda, 1962), *The Modern History of Somaliland: From Nation to State* (New York, 1965), and Samatar, *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism*.

⁶ Cruttenden, "Report on the Mijjertheyn," 112–13; and Samuel Barrett Miles, "On the Neighbourhood of Bunder Marayah," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, 42 (1872): 61–63. Cruttenden and Miles both wrote detailed reports of production and trade on the northern Somali coast. They were assistant political agents at Aden in charge of procuring food for the town. Therefore, both made regular and lengthy trips to Berbera and the Majeerteen country. For information on the physical features and climate of the Majeerteen country, see Great Britain, War Office, General Staff, *Military Report on Somaliland, 1907*, 2 vols. (London, 1907), 1: 21–44 (hereafter, *Military Report on Somaliland*); I. M. Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa: Somali, Afar, and Saho* (London, 1955), 56–66; C. F. Hemming, "Vegetation of the Northern Region of the Somali Republic," *Proceedings of the Linnean*

The main problem in each of these areas was a scarcity of water. The uplands lacked sufficient moisture to provide drinking water or to grow grass except in patches shaped like a crescent moon (called "vegetation arcs" in recent botanical literature). Majeerteen herders therefore ordinarily dispersed their livestock and migrated from one range to another by way of clan-owned wells, rarely staying more than three weeks in one place. They remained far inland during the hot season, August through November. After the northeast monsoons in September, they moved their herds to lower plains, where the grass had been regenerated. Herders ordinarily relied on milk from their livestock as their principal source of food. In the hot season, however, goats and camels stopped giving milk. Majeerteen herders therefore harvested gum from wild acacias in the coastal hills to sell for rice imported from India. Meanwhile, women and children tended the livestock brought from the plains and now pastured at the clan's permanent wells near the coast. In this way, Majeerteen pastoralists made use of their herding economy's flexibility, its main advantage.⁷

Even along the coast, where resources were greater, the Majeerteen seldom produced a surplus of foodstuffs in a year's time. But the coast did provide the fishing peoples with some goods for trade. The residents of Hunda, a tiny village on the south coast, shipped small amounts of frankincense, shark skins, ambergris, palm matting, and ivory to Arabia and India. Coastal residents, however, did not have easy access to drinking water because they lived on islands surrounded by salt marshes. The marshes probably made the villages easier to defend and provided safe harbor for fishing boats, but residents had to carry water to their homes from wells on higher ground, often two or three miles away. Thus, Majeerteen coastal communities had little surplus labor even in good times.⁸

Before 1840, structural weaknesses in the Majeerteen economy did not work any great hardship on either herders or fishing peoples. Pastoralists who ran out of milk ordinarily sold more gum in exchange for rice. Coastal peoples who needed more labor lent their livestock and gum trees to pastoralists who had labor to spare and who benefited from the extra milk. During a drought, however, these measures alone did not always suffice to ensure a subsistence. Herders and fishing peoples then reduced their demand for luxury goods. During a drought in 1843, for example, herdsmen told Charles Cruttenden, a British official at Aden in charge of trade with the Somali country, that they rarely drank coffee. "If we drink

Society, London, vol. 177, pt. 2 (1966): 173–250, and "Vegetation Arcs in Somaliland," *Journal of Ecology*, 53 (1965): 57–67; H. B. Gilliland, "The Vegetation of Eastern British Somaliland," *Journal of Ecology*, 40 (1952): 91–124; J. E. G. W. Greenwood, "The Development of Vegetation Patterns in Somaliland Protectorate," *Geographical Journal*, 123 (1957): 465–73; W. A. MacFadyen, "Vegetation Patterns in the Semi-Desert Plains of British Somaliland," *Geographical Journal*, 116 (1950): 199–211; and S. B. Boaler and C. A. H. Hodge, "Observations on Vegetation Arcs in the Northern Region, Somali Republic," *Journal of Ecology*, 52 (1964): 511–44, and "Vegetation Stripes in Somaliland," *Journal of Ecology*, 50 (1962): 465–74. On wildlife found in the Majeerteen country in the nineteenth century, especially in the Nugaal Valley, see E. Blyth, "Report on a Zoological collection from the Somali country," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Edited by the Secretaries*, 24 (1855): 291–306.

⁷ Cruttenden, "Report on the Mijertheyn," 114.

⁸ Miles, "On the Neighbourhood of Bunder Marayah," 70–71; and Charles Graves to Chichi Graves, May 22, 1878, Graves Papers, p. 16.

coffee once," they explained, "we shall want it again, and where are we to get it from?" Pastoralists also hoarded their livestock during droughts. In 1843, Cruttenden found that herders near the coast gladly sold their livestock to him, except in September, late in the hot season. He was forced to send men to higher pastures in the interior—a three-day walk—to buy meat on the hoof. Presumably, the Majeerteen also expanded their herds when the rains came in anticipation of periodic droughts as Somali pastoralists do today. In sum, the Majeerteen responded flexibly to unreliable rainfall with three strategies—mobility, interdependence, and a conservation ethic—all techniques that reflected a careful appraisal of their environment's limitations and of their own requirements for subsistence.⁹

How successful did these strategies prove when the rains failed? Between 1840 and 1843, the Majeerteen produced only one good crop of gum. In particular, 1843 proved, in Cruttenden's words, "very unfavorable, owing to the drought. The crop of gums [was] not more than half the average quantity." Cruttenden, however, saw few signs of destitution and made no mention of starvation. He reported seeing "fat" goats and sheep in "flocks [that] are immense" and "large droves of horned cattle," some weighing as much as three hundred pounds. He also reported that Majeerteen pastoralists hunted antelope and thereby "frequently provide[d] themselves with an abundant supply of fresh meat." The 1840–43 drought evidently did little to impair the ability of the Majeerteen to feed themselves. But in 1868 a drought produced famine. Why the difference? The answer lies in the growth of the Majeerteen sultanate and its leaders' efforts to expand regional production and trade, a transformation that undercut all three of the herders' subsistence strategies.¹⁰

THE FIRST MAJEERTEEN SULTAN, Maḥamuud (I), came to power sometime after 1809 and in a few years gained control over existing ports on the north coast. He appointed his sons to oversee trade there and to collect a portion of the loot taken from shipwrecks on those shores. Local chiefs (heads of mag-paying groups) who had dominated their own territory's trade and loot soon found themselves subordinate to the 'Ismaan lineage.¹¹ After Maḥamuud's death in 1818, his eldest son, 'Ismaan (I), became sultan and governed until about 1835. 'Ismaan entered into a partnership with a Somali merchant named Fatha Abdi, who lived in 'Alula,

⁹ Cruttenden, "Report on the Mijjertheyn," 114. Cruttenden did not report that Majeerteen pastoralists increased their herds in anticipation of drought, but hoarding might have occurred on the interior plains. Hence, Cruttenden would have had no opportunity to observe that particular strategy, if it occurred.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 114, 119, 122.

¹¹ Information on the sultanate is compiled from 'Ismaan genealogies and traditions. Cruttenden, "Report on the Mijjertheyn," 112–13, 116–17; Miles, "On the Neighbourhood of Bunder Marayah," 68–69; H. M. Abud, comp., *Genealogies of the Somāl Including Those of the Āysa and Gadabürsi by Captain P. Z. Cox, Indian Staff Corps* (London, 1896), iv, 1, 3; Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa*, 100; Enrico Cerulli, "Tradizioni Storiche e Monumenti della Migiurtinia," *Africa Italiana*, 4 (1931): 153–60; John A. Hunt, *A General Survey of the Somaliland Protectorate, 1944–1950* (London, 1951), 146–49; Cassanelli, *Shaping of Somali Society*, 90–96; and I. M. Lewis, "Historical Aspects of Genealogies in Northern Somali Social Structure," *Journal of African History*, 3 (1962): 35–48.

a north coast port that 'Ismaan ruled as head of the 'Ismaan Maḥamuud lineage, which populated the town. According to one European observer, 'Ismaan "considerably increased the trade [mainly in gum and frankincense] of the port." He protected his commerce by building the first stone forts in 'Alula. How Maḥamuud and 'Ismaan accomplished all this remains unclear, but, whatever the details, by 1835 the 'Ismaan lineage had consolidated its position as the most powerful group in the Majeerteen clan.¹²

'Ismaan's death led to a lengthy and violent crisis of succession out of which a larger and more complex regional political structure emerged. 'Ismaan's eldest son, Yuusuf, succeeded his father but reigned only two years, remembered in 'Ismaan traditions as "turbulent," including "quarrels" between Yuusuf and his 'Ismaan kinsmen.¹³ But before Yuusuf could come to grief at his kinsmen's hands, he was murdered in 1837 by a member of the 'Ali Suleymaan lineage. The 'Ali Suleymaan hoped by the assassination to regain control over the loot from shipwrecks on the north coast and the external trade from their ports. After Yuusuf's death, they proclaimed their own sultanate and installed a certain Ismaa'il Maḥamuud at its head. He established a capital at a small trading village, Candala, on the north coast, "so as to concentrate there the whole trade of the Majeerteen country," according to a later report.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Yuusuf's death prolonged the succession crisis in the 'Ismaan lineage. Yuusuf had several sons, but none could rule under Majeerteen law and custom.¹⁵ To break the dynastic impasse, Yuusuf's brother Nur-bin-'Ismaan conceived a solution that in one stroke produced a successor and the need for a regent to rule the country. At the time of Yuusuf's death, one of his wives was pregnant with her first child. Nur-bin-'Ismaan maneuvered to forestall the succession of another sultan until after the infant's birth. As it happened, the child was male, and Nur-bin-'Ismaan championed the infant, Maḥamuud (II), as the only legitimate successor to his father. Until Maḥamuud reached his majority, however, a council of Majeerteen chiefs ruled, and Nur-bin-'Ismaan, its most influential member, ran the sultanate's day-to-day affairs.¹⁶

Having resolved the 'Ismaan lineage's internal crisis, Nur-bin-'Ismaan "succeeded in checking the ambitious designs" of the 'Ali Suleymaan, but not for long. On August 1, 1842, the *Memnon*, a British steam frigate, wrecked on the Somali north coast near Cape Guardafui. The chiefs of three 'Ali Suleymaan and Siwakron villages dispatched their men to loot the ship. But they did not share the booty with the residents of nearby Bander Murayah where Sultan Maḥamuud and his uncle Nur-bin-'Ismaan resided. In response, Sultan Maḥamuud appealed for recompense to the Majeerteen Council, the body of clan elders who met yearly to

¹² Cruttenden, "Report on the Mijjertheyn," 116–17.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*; and Giulio Baldacci, "The Promontory of Cape Guardafui," *Journal of the African Society*, 9 (1909): 65.

¹⁵ Cruttenden, "Report on the Mijjertheyn," 116. The ideal Majeerteen marriage was exogamous. Therefore, only a son issuing from a wife of Dulbahante, Warsangali, or Mareehaun origin could be considered a legitimate heir to the sultanate.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*; and Margaret Castagno, *Historical Dictionary of Somalia* (Metuchen, N.J., 1975), 25, 104–05.

render binding judgments on offenses large and small committed by their clansmen. Because the 'Ismaan Maḥamuud constituted over half of the Majeerteen population, they invariably formed a majority in the council and "drown[ed] the clamors of the arrogant chiefs who reside[d] on the coast," according to a European observer. But before 1842 those chiefs had not included leaders of the 'Ali Suleymaan who had no direct kin relations with the Majeerteen clan. That fact notwithstanding, in January 1843 the council censured the 'Ali Suleymaan chiefs "for daring to appropriate to themselves property cast on the shore by the sea, without the consent of the 'sultan's house.'" In addition, the council levied a fine (of several valuable horses) on each offending chief, which the chiefs agreed to pay.¹⁷

By the early 1840s, then, Nur-bin-'Ismaan had consolidated his power over both the 'Ismaan Maḥamuud lineage and adjacent rival lineages and clans. He thereby secured exclusive control over shipwrecks and their loot and, hence, over the patronage that booty generated. But the sultanate had become more than Nur-bin-'Ismaan's personal tributary state consisting of the 'Ismaan lineage and a few client chiefs. Indeed, the Majeerteen clan itself became the sultanate, ruled by the leaders of the dominant faction in the Majeerteen Council. Their rule was ensured not only by the 'Ismaan majority in the council and control over booty but also by an 'Ismaan monopoly of mounted warriors. The Majeerteen clan no longer merely mediated local disputes but came to dominate all of the region's local political economies.

Over the next twenty years, the Majeerteen's new regional political structure enabled Nur-bin-'Ismaan to expand domestic production and trade and to challenge Indian merchants for control of overseas commerce. Specifically, Nur-bin-'Ismaan sought to take advantage of increased European traffic in the Gulf of Aden. Between 1800 and 1840, British, French, and American traders began to compete with Indian and Arab merchants for dominance of the Indian Ocean trade. To protect British merchant vessels and mail packets plying the Gulf, the East India Company initiated patrols from Bombay to Suez with India Navy steam frigates. About 1839, the Company established a coaling station at Aden to serve that shipping. British actions had two major consequences for the region around the Horn. First, they vastly increased the number of ships sailing in the Gulf of Aden and, hence, shipwrecks, booty, and clients for the Majeerteen sultanate. Second, British commercial activity created a demand for foodstuffs at Aden to supply a local garrison and passing ships. Berbera soon became the major entrepôt for livestock raised in the western Somali hinterlands. The Majeerteen acted as supplementary suppliers to the British.¹⁸

¹⁷ Cruttenden, "Report on the Mijjertheyn," 117–18.

¹⁸ R. J. Gavin, *Aden under British Rule, 1839–1967* (New York, 1975), 22–28; Harvey Sicherman, *Aden and British Strategy, 1839–1968*, Research Monograph Series, no. 12 (Philadelphia, 1972), 7–14; Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa* (New Haven, Conn., 1977), 38–46; Richard Pankhurst, "The Trade of the Gulf of Aden Ports of Africa in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 3 (1965): 36–81, and "Indian Trade with Ethiopia, the Gulf of Aden, and the Horn of Africa in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *Cahiers d'Etude Africaines*, 10 (1974): 453–97; and M. Abir, "Caravan Trade and History in the Northern Parts

Sometime after 1839, Nur-bin-'Ismaan, using his new dominance of the Somali coast as a bargaining chip, concluded an agreement with the British at Aden. The regent evidently hoped to attract British buyers in order to break the monopoly of Indian merchants over the north coast trade. According to Cruttenden, "The people are perfectly aware how much they are pillaged, and earnestly hope that some of the ships that they so frequently see passing along their coast might be induced to come in and trade with them." In the agreement, Nur-bin-'Ismaan promised to extend the services of an *abbaans* to all British shipwreck survivors on the Majeerteen shore. For this the British agreed to pay the sultan an annual annuity of three hundred sixty Maria Theresa dollars. British officials at Aden also apparently agreed to purchase livestock from Majeerteen merchants. In 1843, British officials from Aden began to supervise the recovery of survivors from British ships wrecked on the north coast, and Majeerteen merchants began shipping livestock to Aden. Livestock exports rose from none at all in 1839 to fifteen thousand animals in 1844. Indeed, demand increased for a variety of goods produced by Majeerteen pastoralists. In 1842, one European traveler noted that "the advantage of Aden as a mart is . . . felt in the increasing activity throughout the northern [Somali] districts to produce for that market the staple commodities of the land, hides, gum, cattle, sheep, &c."¹⁹

Trade in livestock had two important consequences for the Majeerteen. First, it forced herders to increase substantially the size of their herds in order to produce fifteen thousand beasts a year above their own requirements for subsistence. As a result, Majeerteen pastoralists dispersed their herds over a larger area and into new lands. The Nugaal Valley, occupied by the 'Iise Maḥamuud, experienced the greatest influx, mainly from Majeerteen goat herds. Further south, the 'Umar Maḥamuud began to encroach on the fertile plains belonging to the Mareeḥaun clan.²⁰ Second, the demand for livestock produced a class of wealthy Majeerteen traders and rentiers. By 1843, 'Ismaan political leaders operated twelve vessels—all but one of which sailed exclusively to Aden and back—out of Majeerteen ports on the north coast. From that commerce, Majeerteen merchants accumulated capital and invested it in livestock. In 1843, Cruttenden reported that "some of the principal Bedouin Chiefs" possessed "upwards of a thousand she camels" and even more goats and sheep. The chiefs parceled out their herds of fifty to eighty animals to their wives and clansmen, who became clients as well as kin. In addition, Majeerteen traders bought usufruct rights to the country's marble hills where acacia trees grew wild. Earlier, herders had claimed acacia plots held in common by the sultan for their own use at no cost. After 1843, the 'Ismaan sultanate sold

of East Africa," *Paideuma*, 14 (1968): 115. For evidence of an expansion of trade after 1800 among Arab and Indian merchants on the Somali coast, see Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa*; and Pankhurst, "Trade of the Gulf of Aden Ports." On the impact of the expansion of regional markets on trade with interior peoples, see Abir, "Caravan Trade and History."

¹⁹ Cruttenden, "Report on the Mijjertheyn," 113, 120, 122; and W. Christopher, "Extract from a Journal by Lieut. W. Christopher, Commanding the H.C. Brig of War 'Tigris,' on the E. Coast of Africa," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, 14 (1844): 101.

²⁰ Cruttenden, "Report on the Mijjertheyn," 120.

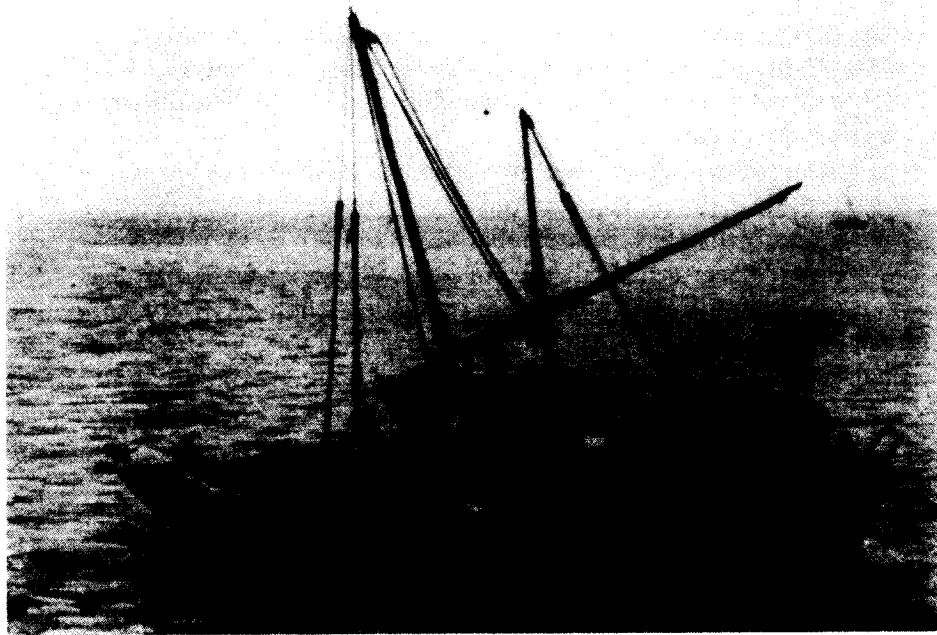
those rights to merchants, who then rented acacia plots to herders in exchange for a portion of the gum crop. Pastoralists became tenants, caring for Majeerteen merchants' livestock and gum trees, although they were somewhat better fed for their trouble than before.²¹

Having transformed Majeerteen production, Nur-bin-'Ismaan set out to turn the region's trade to the sultanate's profit. But a group of fifteen Indian and Arab merchants, mostly Banyans from Bombay, stood in his way. Each year they came to trade on the Majeerteen north coast in October and November at the close of the monsoon season in the northeast. At Bander Khor in 1843, Cruttenden observed 712 tons of gum being loaded on small ships of forty- to fifty-ton capacity. Over half of that gum went to Bombay, a third to the Red Sea ports, and a sixth to the south Arabian coast. To get the gum, Indian and Arab merchants welcomed herders from the interior who, because of the hot season, had trekked to the coast without food, hoping to sell gum in exchange for cash or rice. When the pastoralists' gum supplies ran out, Banyan traders then sold foodstuffs to the herders on credit. According to Cruttenden, "A running account is carried on from year to year, which of course the wary creditor takes care never to settle." Only two Majeerteen merchants had a hand in this trade. Indian and Arab merchants also supplied imported goods to the Majeerteen. In addition to rice, they sold dates from Arabia, tobacco from Surat, dungaree cloth, coarse white American sheeting, blue-striped turbans, and small bars of iron. Profits on these goods were very high. Dates, for example, could be sold to the Majeerteen for twelve times their cost in Muscat. Indian and Arab merchants extended this trade to the south coast during the southwest monsoon season.²²

In the 1840s, Nur-bin-'Ismaan conceded Indian dominance of trade in the Majeerteen north coast ports but sought to open an entirely new port to attract livestock and gum from the Warsangali country to the west and the 'Ise Maḥamuud country to the south. Before the drought in 1842, most trade from those areas passed through the small port of Bander Zeyada. It had been founded about 1800 by "nomads [probably the Wabenaya] from the interior, who gradually came to live on the sea-shore, attracted by the prospect of trade." That trade came chiefly from a crossroads community called Karin, located about a six-hour walk inland, where the Daghan, a perennial stream with a "strong current during the rainy season," passed through a mountain gorge. Good water and "abundant" vegetation made it a rest stop for caravans traveling to the coast from as far away as the Nugaal Valley. Around 1840, Nur-bin-'Ismaan attempted to siphon off some of that trade. He established a port, El Bet Nur (house of Nur), at the mouth of the Daghan, about a three-hour walk to the east of Bander Zeyada. The port,

²¹ *Ibid.*; and Charles Guillain, *Documents sur l'histoire, la géographie et le commerce de l'Afrique orientale*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1856), vol. 1, pt. 2: 436–37.

²² Cruttenden, "Report on the Mijertheyn," 122, and "Memoir on the Western or Edoor Tribes, inhabiting the Somali Coast of N.-E. Africa, with the Southern branches of the family of Darrood, resident on the banks of the Webbe Shebeyli, commonly called the River Webbe," *Journal of the Royal Geographic Society*, 19 (1849): 63.



"Dhows Laden with Hides and Skins," Ralph E. Drake-Brockman, *British Somaliland* (London, 1912), facing page 244. Photograph reproduced courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

however, fared poorly, perhaps as a result of raiding induced by the drought in 1842.²³

When the drought ended, Nur-bin-'Ismaan hoped once again to tap the interior caravan trade passing through Karin. Sometime in the early 1840s, the Kaptallah, a small seafaring group of Somalis, had established the port of Bander Gassim, which was a walk of about three and one-half hours east from El Bet Nur. The prospect of trade, however, soon attracted two more groups, the Dechichi, a local herding lineage only distantly related to neighboring peoples, and the "Bagaren" (probably the Abokor lineage of the Dulbahante), who "came down from the interior, envious of the increasing trade and prosperity of the coast." Each group evidently hoped to bypass existing coastal traders and to sell their livestock directly to buyers in Aden. But each group also proposed to act as a middleman for all others in this new commerce. Therefore, the Bagaren attacked and defeated the Dechichi with guns supplied by Arabian allies and constructed a fort to defend their new monopoly. The Dechichi in turn appealed to Nur-bin-'Ismaan for help. He sent some of his 'Ismaan kinsmen to settle there, hoping to blunt Bagaren control of the port's trade. Within a year that effort emboldened the Dechichi to challenge the Bagaren to open combat. But they lost again because the Bagaren controlled the town's only fort. Nur-bin-'Ismaan and his Dechichi allies then called for a peace conference. They invited elders from each clan and lineage at the port, among them, Nur Maḥamuud, the Bagaren chief. At that meeting, Nur Maḥamuud was assassinated, and Bagaren dominance of the port ended. Thus,

²³ Baldacci, "Promontory of Cape Guardafui," 59–61.

with a single treacherous act, the 'Ismaan sultanate acquired the Dechichi as clients and gained control over a vast and productive hinterland.²⁴

Bander Gassim proved crucial to the growth of the sultanate's economy. In the 1850s it provided Majeerteen merchants access to gum free from competition by Indian and Arab merchants. As a result, 'Ismaan caravans from Bander Gassim for the first time penetrated the interior. These merchants acted as retailers and carried with them goods purchased from Arab and Indian traders. They took care to arrive before herders made their way to the port towns in September, knowing that pastoralists would sell their gum and livestock on the spot to avoid the long journey to the coast. In doing so, herders gave up their right to bargain with competing merchants for higher prices. Majeerteen and Warsangali pastoralists therefore sold their products cheaply and purchased goods at prices that reflected both the caravan trader's cut and the Indian merchants' profits.

Expansion of the Majeerteen internal market in turn stimulated 'Ismaan merchants to trade overseas. They quickly increased their share of the gum trade earlier dominated by Indian and Arab traders. According to one rough estimate, Majeerteen gum exports rose from seven hundred fifty tons in 1843 to between one thousand and fifteen hundred tons in 1856. In 1854, Charles Guillain, a French naval officer sent to survey the east coast of Africa, called Bander Gassim "the Majeerteens' most important village." Ships from Muscat, Bombay, and Aden docked at the port to take on livestock, gum, incense, and myrrh. Thereafter, the sultan, young Maḥamuud, made it his occasional residence and built three more stone forts in the town.²⁵ In the same decade, 'Ismaan merchants for the first time traded on the East African coast, another area where Arab merchants had been dominant. The 'Ismaan shipped dried fish from the Majeerteen east coast to several points south, including the ports of M'Kellé on the modern Kenyan coast and Zanzibar. There they exchanged fish for African millet, which in the 1850s replaced Arabian rice in the diets of Majeerteen herders. On their return voyage to the Horn, 'Ismaan traders exchanged millet for gum brought by the herders. Finally, the sultanate extended its trade to the southern Somali coast. About 1868 an armed Majeerteen force invaded and captured the port of Kismaayo at the mouth of the Juba River, the center of a rapidly developing agricultural region. At Kismaayo, through 1900, Majeerteen merchants purchased cattle and slaves from interior peoples for resale in Arabia.²⁶

'Ismaan leaders wielded their political power to promote greater production and export. Herders and traders now roamed widely in remote territories claimed by neighboring clans, which evidently led to disputes over the control of pastures and numerous attacks on the Majeerteen. Therefore, Sultan Maḥamuud (II) periodically organized military expeditions and fought small skirmishes to defend his kinsmen's interests. Moreover, the sultan mobilized his 'Ismaan warriors to ensure

²⁴ *Ibid.*; and Guillain, *Documents sur l'histoire*, 407. Bander Gassim is shown on modern maps as Boossaaso.

²⁵ Guillain, *Documents sur l'histoire*, 390, 395–97, 408–10, 425–26, 444, 454–59.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 458–59; and Marguerite Ylvisaker, *Lamu in the Nineteenth Century: Land, Trade, and Politics*, African Research Studies, no. 13 (Boston, 1979), 120–21.



"A Caravan *En Route* to the Coast," Ralph E. Drake-Brockman, *British Somaliland* (London, 1912), facing page 112. Photograph reproduced courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

domination of the clan's territories and peoples. In the mid-1850s, Guillaín found Sultan Maḥamuud deep in the interior busy "pacifying a tribe in revolt." To pay for these expeditions, Maḥamuud became a roving tax collector, beginning in 1855 when he turned eighteen and assumed the title of sultan. Earlier sultans had resided on the coast and spent their time trading. Maḥamuud, however, chose to live inland among his herding kinsmen, moving from place to place, while Nur-bin-'Ismaan cared for the sultan's commercial interests in the country's ports. Maḥamuud visited the coastal towns only twice a year and then only long enough to collect his tribute from local chiefs who in turn taxed merchants.²⁷

Sultan Maḥamuud also collected taxes as part of a coherent fiscal policy designed to promote economic development. First, he imposed several direct levies on production. The largest was a 20 percent tax in kind on gum and frankincense. Landlords and tenants each paid one-half of the tax on crops grown for shares. The sultan also demanded one-sixth of all the camels in each Majeerteen herd and one-tenth of all horses but did not tax other livestock, most notably goats raised for export to Aden. Maḥamuud thereby promoted the livestock trade dominated by Majeerteen merchants at the expense of Indian and Arab gum traders. Second, Maḥamuud levied an indirect but fixed tax on descent groups. He required each lineage chief to remit one-third of his receipts, presumably part of the contribution individuals made yearly to their sublineage.²⁸ This tax protected the sultanate's capital reserves. Finally, on the coast, Maḥamuud collected export and import duties from merchants. He placed a levy of one-quarter of a Maria Theresa dollar

²⁷ Guillaín, *Documents sur l'histoire*, 397, 411, 438, 440; and Charles Graves to Chichi Graves, May 22, 1878, Graves Papers, pp. 20–21.

²⁸ Guillaín, *Documents sur l'histoire*, 443–44, 457.

on each *bohar* (about one-tenth of a ton) of gum, incense, and myrrh exported from Majeerteen ports. That amounted to a little less than 1 percent of each item's local value. The sultan taxed imports more heavily. He charged 5 percent *ad valorem* and thereby maintained a favorable balance of payments by encouraging exports over imports.²⁹

But the 'Ismaan rulers' success in promoting large-scale production and trade soon led to periodic economic disaster as a result of rapid ecological deterioration. First, by expanding their herds onto marginal lands, the Majeerteen exchanged selective grazing for an intensive use of all pastures. They thereby gave up the mobility essential to their exploitation of a variable and delicate landscape. Second, a new regional debt structure created by a handful of merchants destroyed the interdependence of herders and fishing peoples. Majeerteen producers therefore had little choice but to sell all of their gum at low prices in exchange for food, which put them in debt to coastal merchants. Simpler ties between a few traders and a mass of debtors replaced an older and more complex set of relations between pastoralists and coastal residents. Finally, the 'Ismaan trading monopoly and its fiscal policy enabled merchants to require expanded production from their clients. Pastoralists had no choice but to raise and sell livestock in order to satisfy creditors and pay taxes. Thus, herds continued to grow even during droughts, killing pastures as they grazed. Pastoralists' efforts to curb their consumption no longer resulted in reduced production. Hence, Majeerteen herders became infinitely more vulnerable to any variability in their natural resources, especially water. Between 1866 and 1880, that vulnerability killed hundreds of the Majeerteen during a lengthy drought.³⁰

IN 1868, WIDESPREAD DROUGHT PRODUCED FAMINE for the first time in the Majeerteen country. Residents there told S. B. Miles, a British officer from the Aden residency, that "a large portion of the inhabitants . . . died of starvation." In 1872, Miles recorded what he saw in the Dharor Valley. Beginning at the coastal village of Hunda, he entered the valley and moved up the river trench. Only by digging two or three feet into the stream bed could water be found. Wild palm trees grew there but little else. Villagers wove palm leaf mats for export and appeared "miserably poor." "There is no cultivation, and the fruit of the wild date seems a staple article of food." Later, about sixty miles farther upcountry, he observed,

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 444; and Charles Graves to Chichi Graves, May 22, 1878, Graves Papers, pp. 20–21.

³⁰ For studies on famine as a political event, see Paul Richards, "Ecological Change and the Politics of African Land Use," *African Studies Review*, 26 (1983): 41–50; and Sara S. Berry, "The Food Crisis and Agrarian Change in Africa: A Review Essay," *African Studies Review*, 27 (1984): 59–112. On herding and the ecology of Somalia, see Jeremy Swift, "Pastoral Development in Somalia: Herding Cooperatives as a Strategy against Desertification and Famine," in Michael H. Glantz, ed., *Desertification: Environmental Degradation in and around Arid Lands* (Boulder, Colo., 1977), 275–305, and "The Development of Livestock Trading in a Nomad Pastoral Economy: The Somali Case," in *L'équipe écologie et anthropologie des sociétés pastorales, Pastoral Production and Society/Production Pastorale et Société* (Cambridge, 1979), 447–65; and Z. A. Konczaki, "Nomadism and Economic Development of Somalia: The Position of the Nomads in the Economy of Somalia," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 1 (1967): 165. Swift examined the subsistence strategies of Somali pastoralists and concluded that the effects (including famine) on the Somali economy of demands for livestock from external markets occurred in the twentieth century. The case of the Majeerteen points to changes occurring much earlier.

"The universal drought in the country had visited this place: they had hardly had any rain for a year, and the river was dry in consequence. All human habitations had now ceased, and I was told that none were to be met with for a long distance in front." Along the way, he could find no gum trees in the hills, and he saw very little wild game. In the same drought, "thousands of animals—camels, sheep, and horses"—died as well. Majeerteen informants pointed out to Miles one man who had lost 384 of his 400 camels. "Many were the stories of large proprietors who had been utterly ruined." By 1872, interior herdsmen were refusing to part with their animals and would not even sell *ghee*, which was usually exported to Arabia, to the coastal Majeerteen.³¹

Majeerteen coastal peoples fared somewhat better. Fish, of course, remained available. Because the drought killed many gum trees, coastal villagers began to plant saplings on their hills, rather than simply exploit the trees that grew wild there. They also tried other kinds of plant husbandry. Between 1869 and 1872, on the plain between Bander Marayah and Cape Felix, villagers planted date palms and millet near their wells "as an experiment." Majeerteen villagers in the two valleys south of Cape Guardafui began small-scale irrigation farming. They learned from an Arab there methods of cultivating maize, tobacco, millet, dates, palms, tamarinds, plantains, and onions. Coastal dwellers reallocated labor rendered surplus by the drought into new channels, mainly to produce alternative goods for internal consumption. Instead of tending pastoralists' flocks destined for sale overseas, women and children hauled water to grow their own foodstuffs. Majeerteen clansmen who dwelt near the ocean appeared to Miles "ready and willing enough to turn to agriculture."³² The coastal Majeerteen fared better than the herders because they did not purchase what they needed for subsistence on a regional market. Production decisions on the coast remained in the hands of local heads of household who respected the limits of their resources. The drought inconvenienced the coastal Majeerteen; it did not kill them.

But herders experienced the drought's ill effects many times over. First, competition for access to pastures and wells led to blood feuds and skirmishes between herding sublineages. Second, disorder engendered by the drought attracted a new enemy to the sultanate—the Khedive Ismaa'il of Egypt who hoped to make it part of a larger East African empire. Finally, the sultanate's rivals, especially the 'Ali Suleymaan, took the region's crisis as an opportunity to settle old scores and regain lost prerogatives. When 'Ismaan (II), the son of Maḥamuud (II), succeeded his father on Maḥamuud's death in 1866, the troubles began.³³

In 1868, the first year of famine, conflict broke out between the Majeerteen and the Warsangali, fellow members of the Harti clan confederation who lived just west

³¹ Miles, "On the Neighbourhood of Bunder Marayah," 63, 74–75. The drought and famine that began in 1868 were not confined to the Majeerteen country but included the Aden area, which no doubt increased pressure on Majeerteen herders to sell their remaining livestock. Hunter, *Account of the British Settlement*, 178.

³² Miles, "On the Neighbourhood of Bunder Marayah," 71.

³³ *Ibid.*, 69.

of the Majeerteen. According to an 'Ismaan tradition, the dispute resulted from the killing of a Majeerteen man by a Warsangali clansman. Most likely, the Warsangali and Majeerteen had plundered each other's rapidly disappearing herds. The killing simply provided an excuse to carry out raiding on a larger scale. But such conflicts in the past had involved only a few dozen men engaged in isolated attacks. In 1868 the fighting quickly escalated to a level never before reported by 'Ismaan traditions or European observers. Local skirmishes among individuals and sublineages gave way to general warfare between a tributary state and its neighboring clans. The Majeerteen sultan raised an army of seven thousand men, nearly every able-bodied adult male in a population of perhaps twenty-five thousand. The smaller Warsangali clan mustered only four thousand. Not surprisingly, the sultan's larger army prevailed, aided by new firearms unavailable to its opposition. The Majeerteen killed eight hundred Warsangali men in a nine-hour battle. Later, the Dulbahante, a third Harti clan that had allied with the Warsangali, lost about six hundred men in a separate confrontation with the 'Ismaan Maḥamuud. Charles Graves, an officer in the Egyptian army, reported that the Dulbahante army was "nearly exterminated."³⁴

Meanwhile, agents representing Khedive Ismaa'il attempted to bring the Horn under Egyptian rule. In 1876, Egyptian military officers approached the chief of Hunda and offered him a protectorate. He accepted, but the protectorate had little value.³⁵ In 1877, however, the British government made a secret treaty with Egypt that assigned to the khedive several territories nominally belonging to the sultan of Zanzibar, including all of the Horn. 'Ismaan ignored the agreement. But, in May 1878, assured of British acquiescence, Khedive Ismaa'il dispatched an armed expedition to survey the Majeerteen coast. He hoped to occupy the sultanate and transform it into "military colonies." But financial difficulties at home and the Mahdist revolt forced the khedive to abandon his plan to seize the Somali coast.³⁶

Yuusuf 'Ali, a wealthy merchant, chief of 'Alula, and head of the 'Ali Suleymaan, gave 'Ismaan more trouble. In 1878 the 'Ali Suleymaan refused to build a residence in 'Alula for Sultan 'Ismaan, claiming that they had built one for the sultan's father and therefore had done their duty. They further asserted that the real difficulty between the groups lay in the sultan's efforts to depose Yuusuf 'Ali and rule 'Alula directly. In their view, Yuusuf 'Ali simply had grown too rich and influential for the 'Ismaan sultanate to tolerate. The conflict worsened when Yuusuf 'Ali and his followers plundered two wrecked steamers at Cape Guardafui without reserving for the sultan his customary share. Between twenty-five hundred and three

³⁴ Gavin, *Aden under British Rule*, 147–49; Charles Graves to Chichi Graves, May 22, 1878, Graves Papers, pp. 21–22; Crabitts, *Ismail: The Malignant Khedive*, 138–41, and *Americans in the Egyptian Army*, 228–38; E. R. Turton, "Kirk and the Egyptian Invasion of East Africa in 1875: A Reassessment," *Journal of African History*, 11 (1970): 355–70; and Hamilton, "Imperialism Ancient and Modern," 19–33.

³⁵ Charles Graves to Chichi Graves, May 22, 1878, Graves Papers, p. 9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 28–31; E. A. Stanton, ed., "Secret Letters from the Khedive Ismail in Connection with an Occupation of the East Coast of Africa," *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 34 (1935): 269–86; and *Military Report on Somaliland*, 121–22.

thousand clansmen of the 'Ali Suleymaan converged on the beach, "coming from a distance of 75 to 80 miles in all directions." Yuusuf 'Ali then sent the scavenged goods directly to Aden for sale. He reportedly gained a fabulous sum for his efforts and divided the proceeds among his people. Thus, Yuusuf 'Ali succeeded in breaking the 'Ismaan monopoly over booty and patronage.³⁷

In 1880 the failure of the rains produced the second famine in twelve years among herders. According to one report, Majeerteen clansmen along the coast sent their remaining livestock to the interior in search of pasture and water. Therefore, they had no milk to sustain themselves. Those who could do so hunted for wild game, chiefly gazelle and antelope, but with little to show for their efforts. At the same time, their supply of gum was exhausted, and they could not bargain for millet or rice. Import-export trade ceased in the port towns. The result was malnutrition, sickness, and "atrocious misery," in the words of George Revoil, an explorer for the French government who spent nearly a year in the Majeerteen territory. The drought produced worse conditions inland. In the Dharor Valley, the 'Ise Maḥamuud were reduced to eating grass and seeds from trees. Revoil visited one encampment where a dozen emaciated women huddled around a fire cooking a pot of leaves for their meal. Their children nearby chewed "ravenously" at a branch cut from a bush. Women and children begged the Frenchman for food. Other 'Ise Maḥamuud people trekked to the coast to exchange their last possessions for whatever food they could find.³⁸

Herders began to raid one another for the little food that was left. The 'Ise Maḥamuud pillaged the 'Ismaan Maḥamuud. The 'Ismaan Maḥamuud in turn robbed Ḍulbahante herders. While Revoil remained in Bander Gassim, in fact, the chief source of livestock and milk in the market there came from camels and goats captured from the Ḍulbahante. In December 1880, war broke out. Ḍulbahante warriors invaded the Dharor Valley and threatened to attack Bander Gassim. Residents there reportedly went about their business armed and on "continual alert." Whether that attack came we do not know, but the Ḍulbahante were in retreat by January 1881. The Warsangali had attacked them from the north. The 'Ise Maḥamuud to the south, meanwhile, had regained control of the Dharor Valley. To Revoil, the Majeerteen country appeared "constantly at war."³⁹

These battles involved single lineages and villages and were smaller and less organized than those of 1868, probably because the struggle between the 'Ismaan and 'Ali Suleymaan lineages had become open warfare by the end of 1880. By December, 'Ali Suleymaan leaders had accepted protectorate status and perhaps military aid from the Italian government. In addition, Yuusuf 'Ali claimed twenty-five hundred to three thousand new client-warriors who had shared in the booty from the two shipwrecks that his clan looted. 'Ali Suleymaan leaders, therefore, were able to attack 'Ismaan from their base at 'Alula. In retaliation, the

³⁷ Charles Graves to Chichi Graves, May 22, 1878, Graves Papers, p. 20.

³⁸ Revoil, *La Vallée du Darror* (Paris, 1882), 94, 102–03, 126, 131, 133, 135, 139, 151, 351.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 20, 95–102, 185.

sultan attacked 'Alula and succeeded in taking it on January 15, 1881. But Yuusuf 'Ali and his army escaped. They retreated into the adjacent Siwakron territory where Yuusuf 'Ali convinced the Siwakron to join him against 'Ismaan. Worse still for the sultan, Yuusuf 'Ali persuaded the large 'Ise Maḥamuud lineage to participate in a general attack to surround and destroy 'Ismaan and his army.⁴⁰ The 'Ise Maḥamuud dominated the Nugaal Valley, and their chief, nominally subordinate to the sultan, controlled his own force of fifteen hundred horsemen.

Whatever the exact outcome of these battles, the 'Ismaan Maḥamuud and 'Ali Suleymaan lineages reached a military stalemate by 1883 and finally compromised. 'Ismaan confirmed Yuusuf 'Ali's position as 'Alula's legitimate chief. In return, Yuusuf 'Ali accepted the sultanate's paramountcy, presumably agreeing to abide by an 'Ismaan monopoly of booty. To ensure the deal, the sultan married Yuusuf's daughter, Aisha. Each would reign supreme in his own sphere, but Yuusuf 'Ali temporarily disclaimed greater ambitions because 'Ismaan held his daughter as a pawn. This solution did not last long. In 1883, with Italian support, Yuusuf 'Ali organized a sultanate of his own at Hobyo on the south coast below the Majeerteen border, which left many in the 'Ali Suleymaan lineage stranded at 'Alula and especially vulnerable when 'Ismaan moved his permanent residence there. But, in 1884, 'Ismaan and Yuusuf worked out another agreement that permitted 'Ali Suleymaan people to live and trade in peace at 'Alula and to retain control of the wells there.⁴¹ Separate sultanates resolved the internal political turmoil that had plagued the Majeerteen since the early nineteenth century.⁴²

Unfortunately, the 1884 settlement between 'Ismaan and Yuusuf 'Ali did little to solve Majeerteen economic problems. Production for export continued to erode the region's limited natural resources. Moreover, after 1900, trade in gum and livestock shifted away from Majeerteen ports to Berbera, where British officials enlarged the harbor and provided greater security for caravans traveling from the Dharor and Nugaal valleys. The decline of the Majeerteen trade caused several port towns to disappear. Berbera also attracted new Arab and Indian merchants who broke the Majeerteen's monopoly of the livestock trade. But the decline of the Majeerteen sultanate did not signal a return to a small-scale subsistence economy.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 29, 77, 156–57.

⁴¹ *Military Report on Somaliland*, 124–25; Robert L. Hess, *Italian Colonialism in Somaliland* (Chicago, 1966), 8, 127; "Luigi Bricchetti Robecchi's Journeys in the Somali Country," *Geographic Journal*, 2 (1893): 361; and "Editorial Notes," *Journal of the African Society*, 8 (1909): 429.

⁴² Lewis, *Modern History of Somaliland*, 99; Baldacci, "Promontory of Cape Guardafui," 59; and *Military Report on Somaliland*, 122–23. In the 1880s and 1890s, Sultan 'Ismaan regrouped his lineages into another single unified sultanate. He ruled without challenge until the 1920s, when Italy attempted to make good on its claims to the Majeerteen country made in the Convention of 1899. In 1925 the Italian army attacked. Sultan 'Ismaan, now an old man, rallied his forces and held off the Italians, twelve thousand soldiers in all, for two years. Finally, an Italian naval blockade cost the sultan his position by cutting off the Majeerteen's overseas trade, the sultan's chief source of income and his peoples' last resort for food during the dry season. In 1927 Sultan 'Ismaan received a pension and was sent to Mogadishu, where he lived until his death in 1943.

Herders continued to expand their herds to provide livestock for export, which meant periodic depletion of pastures. As a result, droughts led to famines every few decades throughout the early twentieth century.⁴³

BY THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY, production for export had undercut herders' subsistence strategies by reducing the control pastoralists had over their kinsmen's labor. Decisions once made locally and once responsive to a delicately balanced environment fell into the hands of livestock buyers in Aden who had little stake in the condition of Somali pastures. Herders therefore had to abandon their interdependence upon coastal peoples, their mobility over a terrain poor in resources, and their practice of conservation during recurring droughts. As a result, they became more vulnerable to changes in the supply of water, their most important resource. Natural cycles of drought and rain had once brought modest prosperity and occasional deprivation. After mid-century, variable rainfall engendered immense but temporary wealth among herders followed by starvation and war. Only the Majeerteen coastal peoples avoided participation in capitalist markets and thereby retained control over their own labor and lands. They diversified their local economy and prospered by subsistence agriculture.

The origins of famine in northern Somalia lay not in active imperial exploitation but in the sultanate's hasty commitment to capitalism. For a time, Majeerteen leaders created an uneasy partnership of two political and economic systems, one aiming toward subsistence and another pursuing profit, one organized around kinship and another structured by ties between patrons and their clients. This was a political economy at war with itself. Herders required flexibility in managing the size of their herds, but British buyers and Majeerteen merchants demanded continuous production and trade regardless of the ecological consequences. As a result, the pursuit of profits by 'Ismaan leaders undermined their clients' ability first to subsist and then to allocate by peaceful means political power among themselves. In doing so, the sultanate rendered Majeerteen clansmen and their families vulnerable to famine and made them easy prey to internal dissension and external enemies—an enduring legacy, indeed, of “atrocious misery.”

⁴³ *Military Report on Somaliland*, 62, 86; Baldacci, “Promontory of Cape Guardafui,” 72; and I. M. Lewis, “Lineage Continuity and Modern Commerce in Northern Somaliland,” in Paul Bohannon and George Dalton, eds., *Markets in Africa* (Evanston, Ill., 1962), 365–85.

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