

A Brief History of Christian Missions in Somalia

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Abstract

For many people, “Somali” and “Christian” are oxymoron but history is littered with enough evidence that this assumed oxymoron is one big fallacy. The purpose of this brief history is to highlight the long and consistent engagement of Christian missions among Somali people in the Horn of Africa. This work will review few of the most prominent mission organizations among Somali people, the challenges and success of these organizations in Islamic Somalia. This review will also elaborate the rebirth of the Protestant mission work in Somalia in the 1950’s and the impact the collapse of Somalia’s central government in 1991 still has on the church in Somalia. Somalia has 128 years of continuous Christian presence which started in 1881. Unbeknownst to many, there are numerous established Christian house-churches in Somalia today. While the exact number of these Somali Christian congregations in Somalia is hard to know, estimates range from few dozens to several dozens. There are also thriving Somali Christian congregations in the Somali inhabited regions of Kenya and Ethiopia. Sustained missionary work among Somalis started in northern Somalia in 1881 when Roman Catholic fathers opened an orphanage in what was then British Somaliland. The first Protestant mission work was established in southern Somalia in 1896 when Swedish Overseas Lutheran Church (SOLC) opened mission work in what was then Italian Somaliland. While the Roman Catholic mission quickly faced intense objections from the local Somalis, the SOLC encountered minimum opposition from the local people. Through their orphanage ministry, the Roman Catholics witnessed the conversion of many children while the ministry of SOLC produced numerous adult believers in a short span of time. Both mission organizations were eventually expelled from the Somali lands by the colonial powers but some of the local Christian communities they left behind hung onto the faith despite the intense persecutions they faced from the Somali Muslims.

Key Words: *Somali church history, Christianity in Somalia, Somalia missions, persecution*

1. Introduction

This paper intends to document the remarkable success of some selected mission organizations to the Somali people and the resilience of the local Christians in Somalia. Islamic Somalia has an estimated population of about 14 million with the longest coastline of any African country according to *World Population Prospects* (2017). The country is predominantly *Sunni* Muslim, located in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti border it. The northern part of Somalia is a former British colony known then as British Somaliland which has a direct maritime border with the Red Sea. The southern part was a former Italian colony known then as Italian

Somaliland which has a maritime border with the Indian Ocean. Both territories united to form one country on 1st July 1960, as the Republic of Somalia. While Somalia is a founding member of the Organization of African Unity (now the African Union), it is also a member of the Arab League. Somalia thus straddles the African continent and the Arabian Peninsula both politically and religiously.

Somalis first encountered Christianity in a significant manner through the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) in 1881 (Fahlbusch and Bromiley, 1991). The Mogadishu Cathedral was built in 1928 and remained the biggest Cathedral in Africa until 1930's according to *Catholic World Report* (2016). Venanzio Francesco Filippini, the RCC Bishop of Mogadishu, reported in 1940 a membership of 40,000 Somali Catholics in the southern Bantu regions of Juba and Shebelle (Tripodi, 1999). The Italian colonial government estimated the Somalia proper population in 1940 to be around 1,150,000 and updated it to 1,200,000 in 1950 according to *Catholic Hierarchy* (2019). This report puts the Somali Christian population in 1940's around 3.5%. If this percentage of Somali Christians is accurate, then the well-known Somali mantra, "to be a Somali is to be a Muslim" becomes a hallow claim (Haile and Shenk, 2011). However, some competent authorities including Bishop Giorgio Bertin, the RCC Bishop of Djibouti and the Apostolic Administrator of Somalia, see the 3.5% figure too high (Bertin, 2019).

The RCC declined in times of intolerance but proliferated in times of religious tolerance. The composition of the RCC is traditionally expatriate, diaspora and upper-middle-class; the RCC in Somalia derives much of its power and prestige from Italy (Cavanaugh, 2016). Other members of this denomination are the local Bantus, who are not among the dominant Somali clans. Thus, formal membership in the RCC in Somalia collapses in times of instability as many non-Somali Catholics and dual-citizen Somalis evacuate. By comparison, the Protestant churches often grow in times of adversity and plateau in times of stability (M.M.M., 2017)

Protestant church in Somalia has a tiny expatriate community and even fewer upper-middle-class members. Thus, few would have the means to flee the country when they become the target of religious persecution. Most members of the Protestant church are from dominant Somali clans. These Christians from major clans are often from a lower economic class and they can tap into Somalia's traditional clan and familial protection system when needed (Gundel, 2019).

The Swedish Overseas Lutheran Church (SOLC) established its first mission in the southern port town of Kismayo, Somalia, in 1896 and expanded its ministry in the south to Jilib, Jamaame, and Mugaambo establishing successful schools, clinics, and churches (Abdullahi, 2015). SOLC experienced early success in southern Somalia. The RCC has, also, in the past responded to the humanitarian needs of the Somali people by opening quality schools, hospitals, and clinics (Abukar, 2015). The RCC also pioneered orphanages, one of which was opened in 1891 in Daymoole, near Berbera, then British Somaliland, by the French Catholic Mission (Abdullahi, 2015).

The Daymoole orphanage is best known for angering the famous Somali mullah and freedom fighter, Sayid Muhammed Abdulle Hassan, who waged a relentless *jihad* against the British

colonizers of Somaliland (Samatar, 1992). One of the most significant triggers of the Sayid's hatred of the British colonizers was when he met kids from the Daymoole Catholic orphanage whom he considered misled and assimilated into the religion and the culture of the Christian occupiers of Somaliland (Samatar, 1992).

The British had finally expelled the Catholic missionaries from Somaliland in 1900's when the Sayid succeeded in enticing hatred against the British in part because of the missionary work of the Catholics (Miller, 2006). The Catholics did not go very far; they moved to Jigjiga, a Somali town in the Somali region of Ethiopia (Miller, 2006). Despite the Muslim opposition, many Somalis turned to Christ because of the ministry of the RCC. Even many of those who did not convert developed an RCC-friendly outlook on life, politics, and culture. The RCC education system was so successful that the Italian colonial government in Somalia gave the church a subsidy by 1939 to manage 12 elementary schools with 1,776 students (Touval, 1963). The paper therefore examines the brief history of Christian mission in Somalia.

2. A Brief History of Christian Missions in Somalia

This section covers the following sections: the rebirth of the protestant mission work and the 1991 Calamity of Christian mission in Somalia.

2.1 The Rebirth of the Protestant Mission Work

There was a vacuum of Protestant missionary work in Somalia after the Italian colonial rulers expelled SOLC in 1935. However, this changed when the Mennonite Mission (MM) entered Somalia in 1953; the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) followed suit in 1954, and they started eminent schools, clinics, and hospitals in addition to their traditional missionary witness (Abdullahi, 2015). After the Daymoole orphanage spectacle, the RCC adapted a more culturally sensitive ministry strategy but the SIM and MM demonstrated the axiomatic missionary zeal which probably contributed to the deep suspicions some local Muslims harbored against the SIM and the MM (Abdullahi, 2011). The MM had its first martyr in 1962 when a fanatical Muslim man stabbed a 33-year-old Canadian born missionary, Merlin Grove, to death in Mogadishu (Abdullahi, 2011).

The SIM and the MM had a formal agreement between them not to establish a denominationally based Somali church (Miller, 2006). This arrangement also meant by default neither to support nor to allow such a denominational Somali church or ministry. The SIM took this thought-provoking agreement more seriously than the more pragmatic MM (Miller, 2006). The united front of these two mission organizations was compromised in 1966 when different groups of Somali Christians in Mogadishu, Bulo Burde and Belet Weyne decided to join the Mennonite church (Miller, 2006). This decision immensely distressed the SIM (Miller, 2006). Despite some occasional hiccups in their relationships, the SIM and MM are the best examples of Christian mission organizations cooperating in bringing the Gospel to Islamic Somalia (Haile and Shenk, 2011). This Christian spirit of cooperation has facilitated the conversion of many Somalis throughout southern Somalia.

When the Somali government nationalized the property of these two mission organizations, the RCC allowed the SIM and MM, and the Somali Christians associated with them to worship at the RCC Cathedral in the Somali capital. This Christ-like gesture has positively contributed to the ministries of the SIM, MM, and RCC (Haile and Shenk, 2011).

French Catholic Mission arrived in British Somaliland in 1891 and was expelled in 1910 (Abdullahi, 2011). Swedish Overseas Lutheran Church entered southern Somalia in 1896 and was expelled in 1935 (Abdullahi, 2011). The Roman Catholic Church established its presence in Mogadishu in 1904 and closed its ministry in Somalia in 1991 because of the collapse of Somalia's central government (Abdullahi, 2011). The Mennonite Mission entered southern Somalia in 1953 and was expelled in 1976; the SIM faced the same fate in 1976 after entering the country in 1954 (Abdullahi, 2011). The ministries of these leading organizations have been hampered by different circumstances beyond their control; despite this setback, these giants are still formidable forces in the Somali ministry.

2.2 The 1991 Calamity

The collapse of the Somali government in 1991 ushered in decades of brutal civil war; the Somali state is still trying to recover from the brutal civil war with very limited success, in part, because of the armed radical Islamist group, al-Shabab. While all Somalis have suffered in the lawlessness that came with the civil war, the Somali Christians have paid an enormous price as they became the target of a Muslim holy war that includes discrimination, dispossession, and killings.

While clan protection in Somalia is still common, persecution of Christians in Somalia mainly occurs outside one's clan turf. For instance, the execution of Professor Haji Mohamed Hussein Ahmed best illustrates this. While Haji is from a dominant clan in northern Somalia, he was martyred outside his clan turf in Mogadishu because of his Christian faith. The most dominant Somali clans are of nomadic background and are known for their combative predispositions. Christians from non-nomadic background clans (artisans, traders, fishers, and farmers, etc) lack significant clan protection and may be killed with impunity by Muslim fanatics and clan-based militias according to the *United Kingdom's Home Office* report (2017). These non-nomadic background Somalis are derogatively referred to as "*looma ooyaan*" which means "no one cries for them," and thus no one seeks revenge for them *as confirmed by Minority Rights International* (2015). The Somali clan protection system with its documented revenge killings is extended to all clan members whether they are saints or sinners according to the Austrian Red Cross report (2009). In the absence of a functioning Somali government, the clan protection system to this day often saves the lives and properties of these from dominant clans regardless of their faith.

To add insult to injury, *Sharia law* was adopted nationwide by the Somali parliament in 2009 as reported by *Global Legal Monitor* (2009). Such a move has made the life of Christians more perilous. Several Western Christians with various faith organizations have been killed in Somalia

since 1991, including Sister Leonella Sgorbati, and other religious workers. Other expatriate mission workers martyred for their faith since 1991 include Verena Karer, Annalena Tonelli, Dick and Enid Eyeington, Martin Jutzi, Leonella Sgorbati, Gilford Koech and Andrew Kibet. No wonder that Ruth Myers, a veteran missionary to the Somalis states, “Currently for Christians, Somalia is considered one of the most dangerous countries in the world, second only to North Korea” (Myers, 2016).

Al-Shabab Islamist group has in the past declared that it wants “Somalia free of all Christians” (Myers, 2016). This al-Qaeda affiliated group confiscated farms owned by Somali Christians as documented by VOM Canada (2011); similarly, this Christian advocacy group published in that same year that prominent “moderate” Somali Muslim scholars and preachers publicly advocated for the killing of Somali Christians in press releases. The Somali government’s official National Television Network broadcast the anti-Christian fatwa press release displaying beyond reasonable doubt its complicity in the murderous fatwa. In an earlier fatwa in 2003, Sheikh Nur Barud and other members of the Kulanka Culimada (now Majma’a Culimada) stated according to Worthy News (2003), “All Somali Christians must be killed according to the Islamic law.” Sheikh Nur Barud and his Islamist group also threatened Somali Christians in Europe according to Somali Christian TV (2017).

No wonder then that marauding radical Islamists kill Somali Christians with impunity according to the Washington DC-based International Christian Concern (ICC) (2013). Such Christian victims include David Abdulwahab Mohamed Ali whom the ICC (2008) described as the “fourth Christian martyred in Somalia in the last six months”

3. Conclusion

Since the late 1990’s, a denomination from the holiness tradition has mobilized its personnel and resources to take the Gospel to the Somalis in Somalia and in other Somali regions in the Horn of Africa. The missionary endeavor of this denomination has changed the landscape of the Somali ministry by providing theological training to it’s mainly Somali ministers, placing resources at their disposal and believing in them. This Somali-led mission effort resulted in dozens of Somali house-churches.

The RCC and some Protestant churches and mission organizations are still active in Somalia today. The RCC is mainly focused on the humanitarian needs of the Somali people who are recovering from decades of ruthless civil war. While a very few Protestant denominations and mission organizations are also involved in the relief and development work in Somalia, most are focusing on church planting and discipleship trainings. In summary, the study shows that Somalia has a robust church history of about 140 years. This research also recognizes how effective a Christian ministry becomes when expatriate missionaries and local Christians minister as a team.

While the study above illustrates the little-known church in Somalia, it underscores the dedication of Christian mission workers and the fact that no soil is too hard for the seed of the

Gospel. Despite the relentless persecution Christians in Somalia face, there is no evidence it has slowed down the numerical growth of the Somali church. Tertullian may have been right when he said, “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed” (Roberts and Donaldson, 1997). The belief that persecution stimulates church growth finds basis in the Acts of the Apostles where the church grew after the intense persecution in Jerusalem, a growth that started with Peter’s preaching at Pentecost in Acts 2. Jesus has also made it clear in the Gospel of John (12:24) that martyrdom and church growth are related using the example of the grain of wheat that falls to the ground dies to produce much fruit.

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