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The Changing Politics of Textiles as Portrayed on Somali Postage Stamps

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As I was working on the research that eventually led to my book, *The Politics of Dress in Somali Culture*,¹ I quickly realized that one of my most difficult tasks would be to find images from Somalia's brief period of functional independence, from 1960 to 1991. While the civil war made it impossible for me to conduct field work in Somalia, my understanding was that it had also devastated local libraries and museums; even if I had gone, there would have been nothing for me to look at. Eventually, I found that I did have access to a few precious sources of archival images: a book titled *Beautiful Somalia*, which was published by the government in the 1970s for distribution to Somalia's embassies worldwide, depictions of Somalis on banknotes, and most fruitfully, images of Somalis on postage stamps. As a form of material culture closely tied to nationalism and national government,² stamps provide a fascinating window into the changing political landscape of Somalia.

Dress and postage stamps under European colonization

To understand the textiles and clothing that the government of Somalia chose to display on postage stamps starting in the 1960s, we first need to take a brief look at historical Somali dress, including how Somalis were depicted on colonial postage stamps. During the 1880s and 90s, Somali territory was divided into five parts. The far north was claimed by France, which became the colony of French Somaliland and eventually the republic of Djibouti. The British incorporated the southernmost region into British East Africa (what is now Kenya), and established the colony of British Somaliland along the northern coast of Somali territory. The southern coast was occupied by Italy and became the colony of Italian Somaliland, while of all the remaining area was claimed by Ethiopia and is still part of that country to this day.

In the 1800s, most Somalis were nomads, travelling seasonally with their herds of camels and sheep between rich grasslands in the interior and wells and trading posts along the coastlines. Trade with Europeans brought enormous amounts of cotton cloth into the Horn of Africa, which these nomads began wearing in place of leather. While most of the cloth was simply white, dyed in shades of brown over time using local plants and earth pigments, fancier fabrics included stripes and plaids, often brought from South Asia on European ships. Both men and women wore this cloth wrapped around their bodies, the women as a dress and the men as a wrapper, covering from waist to knees and sometimes the upper body as well. Among nomadic women, jewelry served as a portable bank account. In particular, necklaces included a variety of precious materials included amber, coral, glass beads from Venice and Bohemia, and silver elements made by Jewish artisans in Yemen and Oman.

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¹ (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

² Phil Deans, "Isolation, Identity and Taiwanese Stamps as Vehicles for Regime Legitimation," *East Asia*, 22(2) (2005): 8-30. Phil Deans and Hugo Dobson, "Introduction: East Asian Postage Stamps as Socio-Political Artefacts," *East Asia*, 22(2) (2005): 3-7. Keith Jeffrey, "Crown, Communication and the Colonial Post: Stamps, the Monarchy and the British Empire," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, March, 34(1) (2006): 45-70. Frederick Lauritzen, "Propaganda Art in the Postage Stamps of the Third Reich," *The Journal of Decorative Arts*, 10 (1988): 62-79. Carlos Stoetzer, *Postage Stamps as Propaganda* (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1953). □

Perhaps not surprisingly, colonial postage stamps showed little of this. Italian officials played a heavy hand in their new colony, viewing it as a blank slate that could be turned into a kind of agricultural and corporate utopia. No new stamps were issued; instead, the colony used postage from Italy depicting famous generals that were simply overprinted with the words, “Somalia Italiana.” Many of the British stamps, of course, featured portraits of King George V and later Queen Elizabeth II. Some contained images of Somalis, but not with any particular accuracy. One from 1942, for example, shows a man leading a camel loaded with parts for a nomadic shelter called an *aqal*. While the man’s clothing is similar to that shown on a postcard of “Somali traders” from the same era, there’s just one problem: women were the ones responsible for building and transporting the *aqal* from one site to another, not men.

The government of French Somaliland, on the other hand, often featured accurate images of Somalis and Afar on its stamps. One from 1902 based on the theme, “protection of indigenous children,” depicted three unmarried Somali girls posed in front of a street scene of Djibouti. Comparing this image to photographs taken in the late 1800s, it is easy to see how true to life this illustration was. When Somali girls were approaching the time of marriage, they would grow their hair long and fashion it into a halo of tiny little braids. Little girls, on the other hand, had their hair shaved close to the scalp in various patterns. This is evident both in photographs and in the stamp.

Transition to independence

After World War II, the political landscape in the Horn of Africa changed dramatically. Since Italy was forced to give up its colonies and Great Britain could hardly afford to sustain such a large empire, the colonies of Italian and British Somaliland were merged and made into a protectorate of the newly-formed United Nations. Although stamps were still being printed in Rome, this transition led to more and more images of Somalis. One from 1955, for example, depicts a man sitting at a loom; another from 1956 (Figure 1) shows two men voting in elections for the Legislative Assembly. Note that the one in front has pants, a button-down shirt, and a neatly-shaved hairstyle, which was an increasingly common sight among educated Somali men; the one in back has the traditional larger hairstyle and wrapped garment of a Somali nomad.

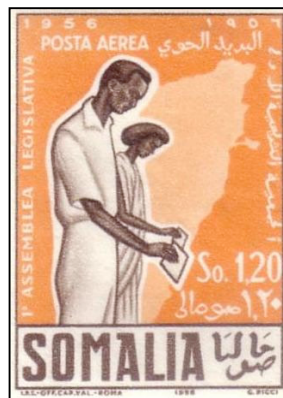


Figure 1: Postage stamp from 1956 depicting two Somali men voting. Note how the one in front is shown wearing pants and a shirt while the other has the wrapped clothing and hairstyle of a nomad.
All stamps from the personal collection of the author.

When Somalia became a fully independent nation in 1960, the government celebrated with even more detailed images of local plants, animals, artisanal products, and beautiful young men and women in contemporary clothing. One of the first stamps accurately depicted a Somali soldier in uniform blowing

a trumpet decorated with the flag of Somalia. Another set from 1960 (Figure 2) shows young women in fashionable fabrics picking various types of local crops. While the basic form of their garments is clearly a knotted and wrapped *guuntino*, a style of dress that originated in the 1800s with Somali nomads, the fabrics have brilliant colors that match the background of the stamps. If you look carefully, one of the dresses even has a zebra print. The use of printed fabrics for this garment was a trend that started in the 1940s, as the end of Italian fascism and renewed production of textiles in South Asia opened up new economic and trade opportunities for Somalis.



Figure 2: A set of stamps from 1960 celebrating young women in contemporary fashions.

Two more sets of stamps from the same year accurately depict a growing divide between men and women (or in this case, boys and girls) concerning dress and expected behavior. While the boy is shown wearing shorts and a t-shirt, drawing a giraffe on a classroom chalkboard, the girl is depicted wearing a wrapped dress and a beaded necklace, embroidering a fish on a piece of cloth. In most cases, girls were not allowed to attend modern schools. As men increasingly migrated to the cities for education and employment, women were expected to stay in the countryside, maintaining the herds and traditional nomadic or agricultural way of life. Although a small number of women were educated and wore sewn garments such as skirts and blouses (for example, women serving as nurses and secretaries in the military), Western styles of dress were never as widely accepted for women as they were for men. On banknotes, even unskilled male laborers were shown wearing sleeveless shirts and shorts instead of wrapped garments.

Dysfunctional fantasies

By the late 1960s, Somalia was already suffering from political corruption and instability. As the situation grew worse, stamps became increasingly ideological and romanticized. A set of stamps issued in 1966, for example, features scenes of men and women in the countryside. By that time, few men were still wearing nomadic dress; although the styles are accurate, they depict more of a romantic vision of the past rather than day-to-day reality. A first day cover from 1968 (figure 3) celebrating the Olympics shows male athletes in shorts and sleeveless shirts. In the center is a large drawing of a nomadic man wielding a bow and arrow. Ironically, there were no archery events at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico. Also, Somali nomads did not use bows and arrows; that was left to an underclass known as the Midgan, who hunted animals that Somali nomads considered too dirty and spiritually dangerous to bother with.



Figure 3: First-day cover from 1968 showing Olympic athletes and curiously, a nomadic man with a bow and arrow.

In 1969 there was a coup that brought dictator Siad Barre to power, the person who many blame for the civil war and eventual collapse of the government in 1991. One of Barre's first acts as President was to declare Somalia a socialist country. As might be expected, many of the postage stamps from this era feature socialist and military themes, such as workers dressed in shorts and sleeveless shirts. One set from 1974 shows a militia that Barre created to employ young men, dressing them in the socialist uniform of green fatigues and red cravats. Although they were supposed to be public servants, in reality they were spies for the government, known derisively as the Green Dogs. Another set of stamps from 1982 (Figure 4) accurately depicts an array of military and police uniforms that were in use during the 1980s.



Figure 4: Stamps from 1982 depicting an array of Somali police and military uniforms.

One important thing to understand about Barre, however, is that he was an orphan who was extremely proud of his heritage coming from a northern, nomadic family. In his quest to make the economy more

self-sufficient and rid the country of neo-colonial influences, Barre viewed himself as a modern-day nomadic general. Looking beyond the military-themed stamps, there are numerous sets that feature romantic visions of nomadic clothing. One from 1975 (Figure 5), for example, shows both men and women in wrapped garments. Although the form of the women's dress is the same as we saw in earlier stamps, in this one all of the garments are white with one exception: a striped ensemble in red, black, and gold, which are the traditional colors that Somali brides wear for weddings. These are not the fashions of the 1970s. Another set from 1984 (Figure 6) is even more of a fantasy. Posed in front of a Mogadishu cityscape, a woman is dressed in a printed *guuntino* with the traditional hairstyle of a married, nomadic woman: parted in the middle and pulled back into two large buns. Looking carefully, however, we can see several oddities. While the hairstyle makes sense, a proper married woman would have covered it with a thin piece of indigo or black cloth called a *shash*. Furthermore, although the dress hangs appropriately from the right shoulder, the folds make no sense and the pattern continues straight through them; the lines do not fit the curves of the body. A stamp from the following year, designed for an international exhibition, is a bit more true to life with one important exception: while the color of the fabric, the folds of the cloth, and even the jewelry and sandals are more accurate than in the previous set of stamps, the fabric is so thin that we can see the woman's breasts through it. By the 1980s a Somali woman in Mogadishu would have been assaulted or even arrested for dressing this provocatively in public.



Figure 5: A set of stamps from 1975 with a romanticized view of nomadic dress.

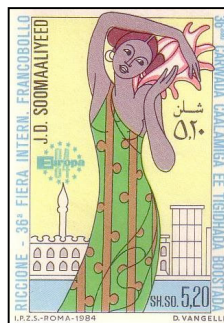


Figure 6: Postal fantasy from 1984 showing a young woman in a wrapped dress.

Missing from these postage stamps was any hint of Islamic dress, which had always been worn in cities along the coast and was becoming increasingly visible throughout the country by the late 1970s. When Somalia joined the Arab League in 1974, it wasn't really because of Somalis long history as Muslims; Barre simply saw African nationalism and Arab nationalism as two parallel movements that should be

mutually supportive.³ Many Somalis were spending time in the Middle East for education and employment; these linkages were important to Somalia's economy, especially as Barre broke off relations with Europe. A smaller number of Somalis hoped for an Iranian-style revolution at home. While praising Islam as a private faith, Barre was highly suspicious of Islam as a political force. In 1975, for example, he ordered the execution of ten prominent imams who were protesting changes in family law. Because of these conditions, the lack of Islamic dress on stamps was not really due to religious prohibitions on depicting the human form as one might think, but due to Barre's own political insecurities.

End of the government, but not of stamp production

In the late 1970s, the Horn of Africa suffered a severe drought. Barre also chose to go to war with Ethiopia, which created a huge population of refugees at a time when Somalia could not afford to support them. By the late 1980s, rebel groups in the north were openly fighting the government. Barre responded harshly with public humiliations, executions, bombing raids, and refusal to allow families to bury their dead. In 1991, rebel armies reached the capital city, forcing Barre to flee Somalia. As various factions began fighting one another for control, the central government collapsed; even now, in 2012, it has yet to be fully restored.

Curiously, although contemporary Somalia has no postal service, it does have stamps. Within months of the government's collapse, new stamps were being printed again in Rome. Although I'm entirely sure who is commissioning these (I suspect warlords), the stamps are clearly designed for external audiences. Many feature themes that appeal to collectors, but have little or nothing to do with Somalia: butterflies, shells, dinosaurs, Princess Diana, the Titanic, and World Cup soccer. Some finally display influences from the Middle East, like a series from 1997 (Figure 7). Notice how, like the romanticized images of Somali women from the 1980s, the folds in the garments make little sense and the printed patterns on the cloth have nothing to do with the shape of the body underneath. The men have turbans and beards and are Arabs, not Somalis. Another series from 1998 (Figure 8) shows Somali nomadic dress, but the person who drew these figures apparently has no idea how these garments are actually worn. These stamps feature proverbs in both Somali and English, which seem to be intended for Somalis living abroad. The stamp on the far right, for example, says, "I wished you a journey full of blessing... come safely back."



Figure 7: Series of stamps from 1997 showing Arab men in turbans and robes, with the same lack of accuracy as Figure 6.

³ Abdullahi Mohamed Hassan, *Jaale Siyad's OAU Chairmanship, June 1974-1975* (Mogadishu: Ministry of Information and National Guidance, 1975).



Figure 8: A series of stamps from 1998 intended for Somalis in the diaspora. While the clothing superficially resembles nomadic dress, the illustrator seems to have had no idea how the garments are actually worn.

Although images of Somali women are no longer featured regularly on postage stamps, in my opinion these are some of the most curious illustrations. One stamp from 1997, for example, is labeled “MODERN ARABIC JEWELLERY” (sic) down the left-hand side. In the center, a large oval is titled, “JOUNG (sic) SOMALI GIRL WITH GOLD ORNAMENTS,” and features an image of a young woman heavily covered with hair ornaments, earrings, necklaces, arm bands, bracelets, and rings. Her clothing is not like anything being worn today: a pastel pink and blue cloth that seems to be fastened at the shoulders with pins, much like a traditional North African wrapper. Although Somali taste in jewelry has shifted from silver to gold (usually gold plated), I have never seen anyone wearing such an extensive amount of jewelry, even for a wedding. This seems more like an advertisement than postage. Another stamp from 1998 (Figure 9) is even more bizarre. Although the woman in this image is wearing a silver necklace and a white *guuntino* with a shoulder cloth called a *garbasaar*, this is where reality ends and fantasy begins. Although the dress has many folds, these do not reflect how a *guuntino* is actually worn. The headdress, consisting of a red cloth with some kind of black hair ornament, does not exist in real life; the long, wrapped braid snaking down her left side is equally unrealistic. Furthermore, the background features a collage of giraffes (even though this animal has become very rare in Somalia), and the floor looks oddly like kente cloth, which is made on the other side of the African continent.

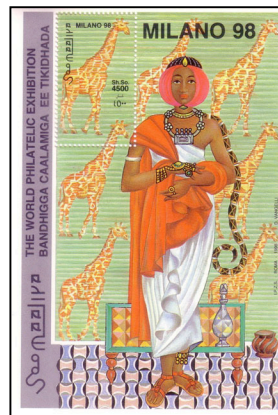


Figure 9: Stamp from 1998 showing another fantasy image of a young Somali woman.

Perhaps not surprisingly, none of the clothing most commonly worn by Somali women today is featured on postage stamps. Considering that Somalia recently held its first free election in more than 20 years, it will be fascinating to see what direction the government takes as it re-opens the postal service and begins issuing its own new stamps. Will they continue to be miniature fantasies produced for foreign collectors, or will they develop into a realistic new vision of national pride? Only time will tell.

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