

## Mad Mullah

Country 161: Somalia.

Time Period: Early Colonial.

“There is a history in all men’s lives”. Shakespeare’s words echo true, as they have done for centuries, yet our understanding of the history of great figures beyond monarchs and emperors of Europe, and modern-era statesmen is minimal. I want to change that. I have given myself the challenge of being randomly assigned a nation and a particular period, and then uncovering the history of a remarkable individual whose history deserves to be told. In this instalment, I have been assigned the nation of Somalia, in the early colonial period, which has led me to the history of one Mohammed Abdullah Hassan - the Father of Somali nationalism.

Let us set the scene. The year is 1884 and the Berlin Conference has cast the future of Africa into stone: it will belong to Europe. Our story, that of Hassan, takes place in the Somaliland region (northern Somalia), a region that the United Kingdom would seek to subdue to help protect British commercial interests in the Horn of Africa - a gateway between the crucial Suez Canal and the Indian Ocean.

Hassan’s early life would depict an unassuming but fervently religious man. He was born on April 7, 1856, and followed a religious education, studying Islam for much of his adult life. His religious piety would enshrine itself in his writings, particularly his poetry, which would shape his eloquence and charismatic leadership for the subsequent rebellion to come.

1899 would be the defining year in which Hassan would begin his long resistance to the British. Hassan was accused of stealing a gun from the British, after purchasing it officially, and received a hostile and insulting letter that left him enraged and prompted him to respond with a brief refutation. Moreover, in Somaliland as a whole, a group of Somali children had been converted to Christianity and had been adopted by the French Catholic Mission at Berbera in 1899. These two events provoked anger from Hassan and legitimate cause for concern about the reach of colonialism which had begun to threaten his religion and livelihood. The Dervish movement, emerging as a resistance against Christian missions and colonial endeavours, had been born.

Between 1899 and 1900, Hassan emerged as the leader of the Dervish resistance, and as the key defender of Somaliland’s political and religious freedom. His charismatic leadership was founded on decades of study of Islamic poetry and oratory, elevating above rival chiefs who also sought to acquire control of the resistance. His efforts of building anti-Christian and anti-colonial support resulted in the attraction of around 25,000 youths from different Somali clans, and he had been able to acquire weapons from the Ottoman Empire and other Islamic and/or Arabian nations that supported his cause.

In 1900, an Ethiopian expedition - the Ethiopians allied themselves with the British, seeking to take advantage of the instability of the Somaliland region to receive territorial and economic gains from raids and looting of the region - looted many camels from the Ogaden tribe. Hassan swiftly responded by attacking the Ethiopian garrison at Jijiga on March 4, successfully recovering the animals, emboldening his will and enhancing his reputation. Hassan further built on this by looting around 2,000 camels from the British-protected

northern Somali clans of Eidagale and Issaq. His military success demonstrated by these two events built upon his foundational skills as a charismatic leader, cementing his power as the clear head of the resistance.

However, upset with his autocratic rule, a rival Mohammed Subeer chieftain plotted to kill him. Whilst Hassan escaped, his prime minister was killed. Hassan was courted for peace by Mohammed Subeer, who sent a peace delegation of 32 men, however, Hassan had all the members of the delegation arrested and killed. It was not until the payment of a large sum of blood money (compensation paid by Hassan for the murder of the delegates) that Hassan was able to re-establish his control of the resistance - this time, for perpetuity.

Acknowledging this rising threat, Ethiopia proposed a joint offensive with the British against the Dervish movement. The combined forces of Ethiopia and the British numbered around 17,000, whilst the Dervish numbered around 20,000. Across the years of 1901-04, Hassan saw spectacular military success, inflicting heavy losses to his enemies and attracting wider support and prestige, including among those Somalis that did not follow his religious beliefs.

Yet, eventually, the Dervish movement's spectacular story of resistance saw its first taste of true and grim peril, as the British, under General Charles Egerton, killed 7,000 Dervish on the Jidaale plain in January 1904. This defeat forced Hassan and his remaining men to flee to Majeerteen country - a region in the northeast of Somalia.

Here, they constructed a small theocratic state in the Italian protectorate, after being ceded the Nugaal valley - a region south of Majeerteen and Somaliland proper - under the Illig treaty. This consolidation was solely based on the intention of building up to renew the fight against the colonial powers and building on Hassan's autocratic strength as the leader of the Dervish movement.

In 1909, Hassan renewed the Holy War, and four years later, he won a crucial victory at the Battle of Dul Madoba, where the Dervish were able to kill or wound 57 members of a 110-man army referred to as the "Somaliland Camel Constabulary", including a British colonel. This prompted the British to pay greater focus to Hassan's military organisation, as they established the Somaliland Camel Corps in 1914, eager to strike out against Hassan and remove a threat to colonial control once and for all.

Unfortunately for the British, the outbreak of WWI saw a need to suspend any attacks on the Dervish movement, as conflict with Hassan became a secondary priority compared to the far more critical conflict with the Central Powers. The Dervish, however, were able to take greater advantage within this suspension of conflict, as they further consolidated their power, raided local British strongholds, and built up their forts in a variety of regions - acting as a mobile state that would come to be indicative of later Somali 'proto-states'.

Time was, however, ticking for the Dervish and Hassan, with the conclusion of WWI resulting in a British victory. Finally, the British were able to suppress the Dervish movement and Hassan in totality, and to put an end to the two decades of resistance that this movement had created.

At the beginning of 1920, the British were able to utilise their superior air and land forces to attack the Dervish settlements, inflicting a totalising defeat. Hassan fled to Ogaden and

sought to rebuild his army. Whilst Hassan did receive a British peace delegation that offered to give him a government subsidy and a land grant in the west of British Somaliland where he could settle with his followers, his hubris and anti-colonial zealotry led to him not only spurning the proposal but raiding the returning delegation.

Ironically, despite the bloodshed and violence that Hassan had lived with across the past twenty years, and that had become associated with him to such an extent that he became dubbed as the 'Mad Mullah', it would not be any assassination or military defeat that would take his life, but rather, influenza, that would claim him on December 21, 1920, at the age of 64.

A remarkable story, isn't it? Whatever you may say regarding the brutality of the Mad Mullah, and the violence that came with his reign, his efforts in building national unity in a region considered by most to be a synonym for chaos and disorder, in addition to his continued success in his resistance against far more distinguished and technologically superior colonial forces, truly tell a story of miraculous achievement and ability. In the modern age, Somalia still lives with the consequences of Hassan's achievements and his vices, leading to a complex assessment of his legacy.

Whilst, he is widely celebrated as a founding figure of pan-Somalism, (and even by some as a symbol of African resistance to colonial occupation, being looked at positively by some in the Pan-Africanism movement), he is also a cause of the disrepair that Somaliland would gradually fall into, with the violence of the Dervish movement - often at fault for indiscriminate raids against friend and foe - killing nearly a third of Somaliland's population during the two-decade long-war, and ravaging the land and local economy.

Somalia itself is often looked at in the modern age as ungovernable. The British, once Hassan was defeated, also learned that lesson. Finding that governing the region was effectively impossible, due to the number of warlords that would frequently take to rebellion. The ongoing Somali itself is a modern-day token of that. In truth, the origins of this conflict can be traced back to the overarching cultural and religious ethnography from centuries prior, in addition to the political experiences of the Somali nation that was stripped five-ways during the European conquest of Africa (British Somaliland, British Kenya, Italian Somalia, French Somaliland, and Ethiopia). The fact that Hassan was able to - for a space of time - unite a wide group of people under the banner of a shared idea of religion and resistance, is truly indicative of a man who deserves to be known and deserves to have their history brought to light.

I'll leave you with a quote from one of Hassan's poems. Characteristic of his complexity in modern historiography and the dubious nature of his heroism and his violence, his bravery and his vengeance. A man who held to his ambitions of freeing Somaliland from the shackles of colonialism, pledging to "lay my vengeance upon them! As long as my deathbed does not take me! ... at some point I will disintegrate them all, like the coming of a he-lion, someday, I will achieve my objective."