

# University rebirth in Somalia: culture, education, and scientific research

## *The Italian-Somali relationship*

Paolo Sannella

Former Italian Ambassador to Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Burkina Faso, Liberia, and Sierra Leone; Founder and President, Center for Research and Training on the State in Africa, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire; Founder and President, Center for Relations with Africa of the Italian Geographical Society, Rome, Italy

On July 1, 1960, the Somali Republic was born, thus ending, among other things, the formal bond that had united Somalia to Italy since 1908, under direct Italian colonial administration and then, in the 1950s and 1960s, under the United Nations trusteeship entrusted to Italy. While Somalia's independence marked the end of that relationship, it did not substantially alter the cultural, economic, and even political cooperation between the two countries. Indeed, the following years saw an extraordinary development of those relations.

The creation of a modern National University in Mogadishu – thanks to the substantial support of the Italian Cooperation, its universities, professors, and researchers – was the project that ranked first in importance among the significant initiatives born in those years and which were to have a profound impact on that society and its future.

The University was founded in Italian out of sympathy for that culture but also to avoid an overly pronounced dependence on English and Arabic, and thus on those spheres of influence. This choice was predominantly nationalistic but also reflects a sense of closeness to Italy and its politics. At the same time, thanks to Italian government cooperation, the study of the Somali language

developed, and the language was written for the first time in those same years, adopting Latin characters rather than Arabic. The Somali government, moreover, made no secret of its sympathy for the political and ideological positions of the “Italian left”, ushering in a period of committed collaboration with the Italian political parties operating in that area.

An Italian journalist living in Somalia during those years, Pietro Petrucci, has vividly described how the university project can be considered the product of the positive, confident, and combative climate of those years and of the first Somali governments following Siad Barre's 1969 coup. The project was, above all, the brainchild of two men, each driven in his own way by profound ideals, who, for different reasons, believed that creating a new and modern center of knowledge, education, and culture was the best way to prepare young Somali society for a secure and stable future: Professor Paride Stefanini, a renowned Italian surgeon and powerful figure, and Mohamed Aden Sheikh, a multiple-time minister and the true Somali helmsman of the project. Petrucci dedicated a well-documented memoir to these two enlightened men of science and politics, summarizing some of the events in Somalia at the time and the relationship between Rome and Mogadishu.

The first strategic decision at the heart of the university project was to concentrate teaching and research in “scientific” disciplines such as medicine, agriculture, veterinary science, and engineering, rather than the humanities that had characterized past collaboration. This choice seemed necessary to meet the most pressing development needs of that society, but also to avoid the easy mistakes that can arise from interfering with how a person or social group exists rather than operates. The second important decision was to involve several Italian universities in the project's implementation, competing for their methods and the efficiency of their services.

The project developed different adaptations and contents depending on the faculties involved from time to time, helping to lay the foundations for healthy scientific and educational competition, accompanied by increasingly complex and difficult problems of unitary management.

In 1991, with the outbreak of civil war in Somalia, the project ceased operations after approximately 22 years of orderly development. Thirty dark years of war and destruction followed, during which Somali society paid a heavy price, with the dispersion of many of its best people throughout the world, resulting in tremendous physical and moral suffering, deaths, and the deepening of social and religious divisions. From this period of suffering, Somalia now appears to be reemerging with all its strength and intact development prospects. It is precisely in this moment of rebirth that the bond of friendship, solidarity, and cooperation that characterizes the relationship with Italy is being renewed. And this time, too, everything seems to once again hinge on culture, science, and shared knowledge as a shield against the violence and terrible degradation resulting from hostilities and war.

Correspondence: Paolo Sannella, Center for Relations with Africa of the Italian Geographical Society, Rome, Italy.  
E-mail: paolosannella40@gmail.com

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Somali pacification – achieved through a complex but uninterrupted dialogue between the conflicting parties – has primarily sought new mechanisms for territorial and social coexistence. The semi-federal form of the state and the decentralization of many administrative functions are an integral part of the new social pact capable of overcoming conflicts and unifying the country. A country increasingly connected to the overwhelming movement shaking all of Africa in search of new identities and courageous solutions to its problems.

Of particular interest and importance was the push in each region to establish its own research and education institutions. New universities were established, often differing in the quality and rigor of their studies, but testifying to the universally recognized importance of knowledge and a mature mastery of the most advanced technologies.

In this atmosphere of reconstruction and rebirth in Somalia, there was also a need to place at the center of this development an institution capable of coordinating, and in some way directing, the various initiatives, also with the aim of finding coherent shared responses to the needs that the ongoing social renewal was increasingly posing.

And once again, cooperation with Italy, with its teaching and research experiences renewed in form and content, appeared to be a reliable and available partner for the project's implementation. Many of its universities and research centers gradually did the

same. Despite this consensus – and perhaps also due to the absence of powerful “unifiers” like Stefanini and Mohamed Aden – the new university project encountered difficulties in its launch, especially regarding the necessary Italian government support. These difficulties are being overcome despite the solid scientific and functional growth of the university. Some innovative projects – such as the one related to the training of qualified managers for the new Somali public administration – are emblematic of the project's transformation, maturity, and relevance.

In recent years, the Italian political landscape – especially regarding relations with Africa and its rapid development – seems to be changing and setting new goals. The formulation and launch of the so-called Mattei Plan represent a comprehensive expression of this. Born primarily as a methodological platform, the Plan aimed to position Italy as a player ready and interested in listening to the requests and needs authentically formulated by Africa, to then form the basis of the political, technical, and financial dialogue necessary to identify and manage possible solutions. A new formulation to give life to that “partnership” that has too often remained a mere dream. The Somali university project and the extraordinary scientific research projects associated with it seem ideal terrain for concretely experimenting with a renaissance in Italian-Somali relations and for an equally concrete demonstration of the methodological and operational validity of the new approach of Italian Cooperation.