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If Buildings Could Talk: The Ottoman and British Architectural Legacies in Berbera and the Hidden Stories They Tell

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Abstract

This essay explores how Ottoman and British architecture in Berbera materializes two distinct forms of imperial heritage, and how Somalis in Berbera reshaped these structures and made them their own. Drawing on archival research, visual analysis, and oral history, it employs Hannoum's concept of the imperial invention of space to highlight the strategic spatial ordering introduced by the British, and Bhabha's vernacular cosmopolitanism to show how local communities adapted imperial architectural forms. The essay also finds that Somali leaders rejected Ottoman–Egyptian claims over Berbera and negotiated with the British from a position of sovereignty, making British presence an outcome of mutual agreement rather than subjugation. A decolonial reading of Berbera's Ottoman buildings, British quarters, *Indian Line* houses, and the Turkish Mosque reveals that imperial powers never fully defined the Somali coast, especially Berbera. Instead, Somalis continually transformed imperial space and relied on diplomacy to assert their autonomy. Today, as Berbera re-emerges as a strategic port, these buildings stand as material evidence of negotiation, resistance, and enduring Somali agency.

Keywords: Berbera, Ottoman architecture, British Somaliland, cosmopolitanism, and imperial.

1. Introduction

Berbera, once a center of empire, now stands as an emerging economic hub. In the post-colonial Somali Republic (1960–1991), Berbera served as one of the country's major economic ports (Lewis 2002). Following the 1991 collapse of the Somali state and

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Somaliland's reclamation of its lost independence, Berbera began to rise again, reasserting its strategic position in the Horn of Africa (Bradbury 2008). The absence of international recognition has imposed political and economic limitations on this port city. Yet, the development of the Berbera Corridor, which links Berbera to landlocked Ethiopia, signals a major regional transformation (de Waal 2015).

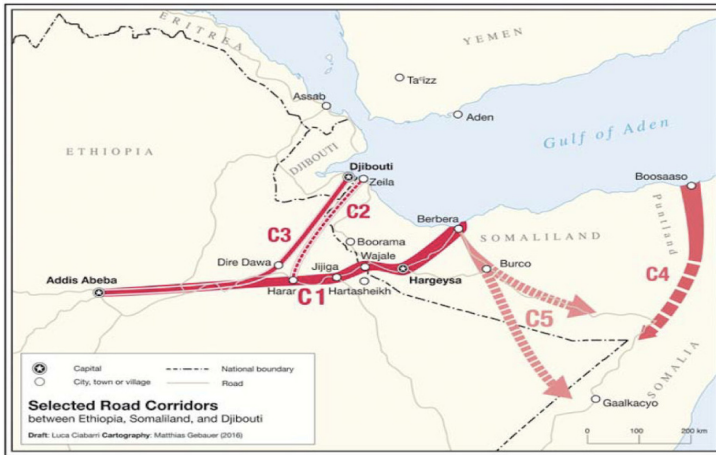


Figure 1. This map of Berbera and the Horn of Africa show the strategic importance of Berbera's location at the entrance of the Bab al-Mandeb Strait. In today's world, its importance lies in connecting Africa, especially in its economic role for landlocked Ethiopia, through the Berbera Corridor project.

The significance of Berbera lies primarily in its location. Both historically and in currently, Somaliland possesses a coastline of approximately 850 kilometers, and with its current infrastructure, Berbera can supply not only Ethiopia but also other landlocked African states, positioning the city as a contributor to Africa's contemporary economic growth (Walls and Kibble 2010). While the full economic possibilities of Berbera in the Horn of Africa deserve their own study, this essay focuses on a different question: How do Ottoman and British architectures in Berbera materialize different imperial projects, and what happens when these buildings are read through decolonial Somali perspectives rather than through colonial eyes?

Somali nomadic society traditionally lives in widely dispersed family groups, each occupying a large expanse of land, sometimes five to ten kilometers, to allow for grazing and movement. Because of this lifestyle, nomads value open space and mobility (Ahmed 1995). Urban settlements demand a fixed structure with markets, mosques, schools, administrative buildings, and public squares, all of which stand in contrast to the rhythm of nomadic life (Samatar 1992). When Muslim empires arrived on the northern Somali coast, it was difficult to determine exactly who first settled Berbera. However, in the case of the Ottoman Empire, several buildings from the nineteenth century still exist today. Many of these structures are in old Berbera, known as Daarooole, and they display architectural features characteristic of the Ottoman Red Sea coastal world identified in studies of Suakin, Massawa, and Quseir (O’Fahey 1994; Miran 2009; Trevaskis 1968). Although many are deteriorating, buildings such as the one examined here retain essential Ottoman features, including tall vertically proportioned windows, rounded arches, rhythmic fades, and lime-plastered coral-stone construction. These architectural elements place Berbera firmly within the nineteenth-century Ottoman maritime network connecting Northeast Africa to the Hejaz and Egypt (Miran 2009).

Berbera’s strategic significance attracted both the British and the Ottomans. Letters preserved in the Qatar Digital Archive, dated 31 December 1873, from the British Resident of Aden to the Government of India, discuss “Berbera affairs” and request instructions “in connection with Egyptian and Turkish proceedings at that port” (Qatar Digital Archive, 1873). This correspondence demonstrates that Berbera occupied a contested imperial space and that Ottoman authority in the city transitioned to British control within broader geopolitical negotiations rather than through confrontation.

2. Theory and Method

The method that this essay uses includes archival research mainly from the Qatar Digital Library, which contains many records about Somali and Ottoman relations, letters from the Ottomans via Egyptians claiming Somali coastal waters, letters from the Queen

of England asking the Ottomans to give her the port of Berbera, British archives comprised mostly have agreements between traditional leaders and British representatives, and oral history narratives. Visual analysis of Berbera's architecture is also used to understand what it means to people and how the buildings differ. As a theoretical framework, this essay employs Abdelmajid Hannoum's concept of the imperial invention of space, as both the British and Ottomans influenced Berbera to serve their own interests, but with different methods: the British through diplomatic relations and the Ottomans by trying to impose their Islamic influence. Homi Bhabha's idea of vernacular cosmopolitanism explains how local communities adapt and localize foreign influences, including architecture, within their own cultural frameworks. The concept describes cities where people of different origins live together and, over time, become part of the social fabric, whether they arrived for trade, education, or other purposes. Berbera embodies this definition: its people, and even its architecture, reflect a long history of cultural blending and local adaptation. Today, buildings from the Ottoman and British periods are part of Berbera's heritage. Central to this discussion is Somali culture, the traditional leaders who understood the importance of preserving their own customs, laws (*xeer*), and way of life, and who refused to submit to any empire.

3. Ottoman Architecture and Imperial Materiality

Being associated with the Ottoman Empire placed Somalis and the port of Berbera within the wider Islamic imperial world, yet archival evidence shows that this connection was far more symbolic than political. Documents from the Qatar Digital Archives dating from the 1870s reveal a clear conflict between coastal Somali communities and the Ottoman Empire (Egyptian Claims, 1870p, 1-2). Somalis felt that they were being treated as expendable, as their territory was used as a bargaining chip between the Ottoman Empire (acting through Egypt) and the British, who depended on Berbera to supply livestock to Aden. Egyptian authorities, claiming sovereignty over the Somali coast on behalf of the Ottomans, attempted to assert control over Berbera and neighboring ports. This prompted Somali clan leaders to respond firmly that they had never been under Turkish rule, a

position recorded repeatedly in British correspondence from Aden. According to these reports, Somali elders resisted Egyptian–Ottoman claims and defended their port, refusing any foreign flag, taxation, or external authority (Qatar Digital Archive, 1870).

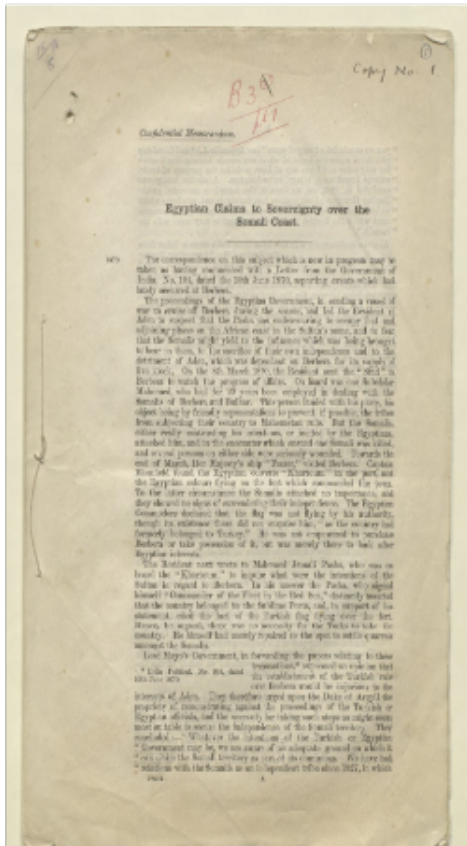


Figure 1. A section of the archival record documenting the tensions between the Egyptian–Ottoman administration and Somali traditional leaders.

This moment marked the beginning of the fracture between the Ottomans (via Egypt) and the Somali communities of the coast. Yet architecture does not change as quickly as political relationships do. While tensions escalated in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the question of *when exactly* the Ottomans built the surviving structures in Berbera requires further research, as the archival record is clearer for the late nineteenth century than for earlier periods.

Long before these political disputes, relations between Somalis and the Ottoman Empire were largely cooperative. In the sixteenth century, during the campaigns of Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (Ahmad Gurey), the Ottoman Empire supplied military assistance, firearms, and advisers to support Somali–Adal forces in their struggle against the Portuguese (Trimingham 1952; Lewis 1998). Early connections between the Somalis and the Ottomans were grounded in shared Islamic identity and regional strategic interests. Historical studies also confirm that Berbera and the wider northern Somali coast maintained vibrant commercial ties with Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula, India, and the Red Sea world (Alpers 2009; Clarence-Smith 1989). In the seventeenth century, the Berbera Trade Fair emerged as one of the most important commercial gatherings in the western Indian Ocean. During this annual fair, attended by merchants from Yemen, the Hejaz, the Hadhramaut, Gujarat, and Oman, Somalis exchanged livestock, hides, ghee, myrrh, frankincense, and other goods for textiles, metals, and imported foodstuffs (Cambridge History of Africa 1975; Lewis 1998). This flourishing Indian Ocean trading network provides the economic and cultural backdrop for early Somali, Ottoman interactions, long before the political disputes of the nineteenth century.

The plausible Egyptian–Ottoman leader under whose authority the surviving houses, mosque, and the Berbera water well were constructed or renovated is Khedive Isma‘il Pasha, whose administration controlled the Red Sea coast between roughly 1869 and 1884. The document *Egyptian Claims to Sovereignty over the Somali Coast* (Foreign Office correspondence, 16 November 1878, pp. 14–16) supports this period. Although the British bombarded Berbera in 1827 and later used it as a trading post, they did not fully occupy the port. Their presence remained limited until the 1880s, when Egyptian claims to sovereignty intensified. Beginning around 1875, Egyptian authorities, acting under nominal Ottoman rule, attempted to impose taxation and administrative control over the Somaliland coastline. Somali elders, however, consistently rejected these claims, and there is no historical record of a major battle beyond the well-documented Somali refusal to pay Egyptian taxes. The British formally took over Berbera in 1884 and eventually made

it the capital of the British Somaliland Protectorate in 1941. Current scholarship confirms only Ottoman–Egyptian political presence along the coast in this period, while also noting the lack of direct architectural records for Berbera (Özköse 2021; Britannica 2024; Meredith 2013).

4. Everyday Life, Memory, and the Afterlives of Ottoman and British Architecture in Berbera



Figure 2: The left picture shows the former British Statehouse, and the right picture in the middle of the old city. Photo © HCC.

Some of these buildings have been rebuilt, and in several cases, the Berbera Museum team has succeeded in ensuring that the architecture remains as close to the original as possible. However, many of these houses are now privately owned, which makes it difficult for the local government, under which the Berbera Museum operates, to intervene or carry out preservation work. One feature these buildings share is their environmental adaptability. Berbera is an extremely hot coastal city, and the architectural design responds intelligently to this climate. The large window openings, the shape of the windows, and the use of wooden roof structures all allow air to circulate and cool the interior spaces. Many of the houses are also located close to the sea, which brings in fresh breezes. In addition, most of the British-built houses have wide verandas that provide shade and further ventilation.

Most of the houses in Daarroole are abandoned, and some are collapsing, although several of them remain intact and continue to be lived in. One interviewee in 2022 said:

“I have lived in this house for the past fifty years, and my father lived here before me, and his father also lived here. Originally, we are from India, specifically Hyderabad, but we know very little about Indian culture. I consider myself a Somali woman.” (*Interview, Nov. 20, 2022*).¹

This reflects Berbera’s vernacular metropolitan character; a woman’s origin does not matter because she is considered part of the Berbera community. In fact, even in the late 1990s, people in Berbera did not strongly identify with their clan. Instead, they were known as *Reer Daarooole*, *Reer Barwaaqo*, or *Reer*, followed by the district name, “*Reer*” simply meaning “family” in Somali. Similarly, the Turkish Mosque is well-protected, still fully functional, and people continue to pray there; in fact, many prefer it because it remains very cool.



Figure 3. This is the Turkish Mosque. The ceiling is made of wood, while most buildings in Berbera use steel ceilings, which makes the mosque cooler during the summer.

Most of the Indian Line houses have been destroyed and rebuilt, with families constructing their own newer homes in their place. The *Shacabka* houses, however, remain mostly intact because they were built from stone and are larger in size; many are occupied by government staff, although some civilian families also live in them. The British hierarchy no longer exists; today, the city is overwhelmingly Somali. A few families of Indian

¹ This interview was part of the Hargeysa Cultural Centre’s collaboration with University College London (UCL) on the project “Covid-19, Infrastructural Development, and the Biogeopolitics of Everyday Life in Berbera.” It forms a component of the broader research initiative documenting Berbera conducted by the Redsea Cultural Foundation’s Hargeysa Cultural Centre and UCL’s Development Planning Unit (DPU) in Berbera, Somaliland.

origin, and some who came originally from Yemen or other Arab communities, still live there, but they too consider themselves Somali.

The two empires, the Ottoman and the British, brought with them two different ideologies, two different civilizational worldviews, and two contrasting ways of seeing Somali society. The Somalis, in turn, perceived them differently. Although Somali interaction with the Ottomans was largely mediated through Egypt, except during periods of Portuguese encroachment along the Somali coast, Somalis regarded the Ottoman state as part of the broader Muslim world with whom they shared religious and cultural identity. The absence, or limited availability, of written agreements suggests that Ottoman–Somali relations did not follow a subjugating, treaty-based model. Instead, interaction operated within a broader Islamic framework shaped by *shareca*, mutual trust, and established Red Sea trading customs rather than formal contractual arrangements. The British presence, however, was approached with far greater caution. The 1827 *Articles of Friendship and Commerce* between the Sheikhs of the Habr Awal and Captain J. J. Gordon Bremer of the British Navy clearly demonstrate that Somalis understood the nature of British power and recognized it as fundamentally different from that of the Ottoman Empire.

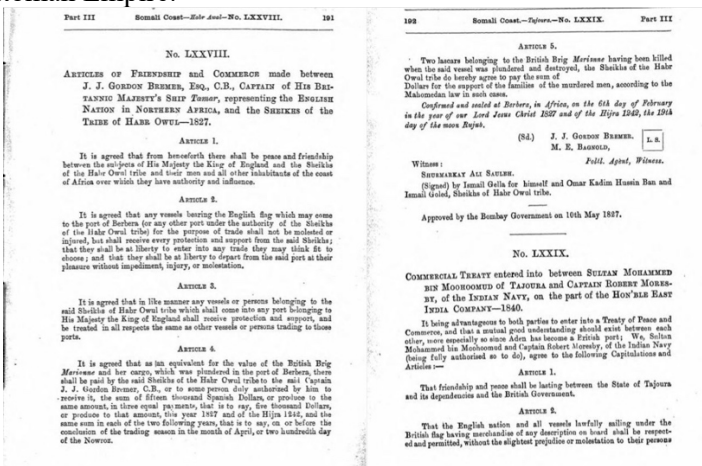


Figure 4. This is a portion of the treaty between the Sheikhs of the Habar Awal and Captain J. J. Gordon.

The treaty, particularly Articles 1–4, reveals Somalis' determination to safeguard their autonomy, controlling trade at the port of Berbera, demanding compensation for damages, and maintaining the right to refuse or regulate British access. The above agreement (Figure 4) establishes how dignity within the Somali culture was a fundamental value (Bulhan, 2013). These clauses demonstrate political community negotiating from a position of sovereignty rather than submission (British Government 1827, 191).

This difference in perception also materialized in the built environment. During the British period, colonial officers lived in segregated quarters known as *Shacabka* villages, which still exist in Berbera, Hargeisa, Sheikh, and Burco. Adjacent to these were the Indian Line quarters, where Indian administrators and labourers employed by the British resided, followed by the Somali districts. There is a clear architectural differentiation in Berbera between British, Indian, and Somali areas, unlike the Ottoman–Egyptian presence, which did not leave evidence of comparable spatial segregation.

The physical layout of the town demonstrates this distinction: the former British residences were predominantly stone-built and substantially larger, such as the examples shown above. The Indian quarters, known as the Indian Line, consisted of smaller stone houses situated close to the British neighborhood. During the British period, Somalis lived near the shoreline and the livestock market. The only explicit textual classification of Berbera's spatial distribution in the British period is found in the following description:

“The native town, rebuilt since a great fire in June 1888, and consisting now of mat huts, an increasing number of stone buildings almost all along the sea, a few mosques, a pier, a customs-house, and its own drinking tank, all laid out in broad streets... 30 feet to the mud and coral beach, on which, just below the Shaab, is a large stone water tank. Between the native and official town are the pohee quarters, and west of the latter a detached fort, from which, now, to the Shaab pier, runs a trolley line.” (*Official History of the Operations in Somaliland, 1901–04, 1907*).

Beyond this written account, much of Berbera's historical differentiation is conveyed through its surviving architecture, which reflects the layered presence of the empires that shaped the town.

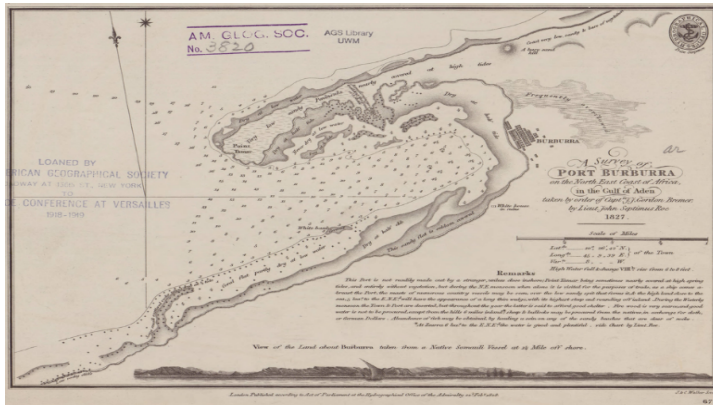


Figure 5. A Survey of Port Burburra (Berbera), 1827. Hydrographic map produced under the order of Captain J. J. Gordon Bremer and surveyed by Lieutenant John Septimus Roe. This early British chart illustrates Berbera's coastline, anchorage points, tidal patterns, and settlement layout, offering one of the earliest detailed colonial mappings of the port's geography

5. Reading the Built Environment Against the Archive: A Decolonial Interpretation

What the houses of Berbera reveal is a history that may not be fully written in books. Regardless of how local communities perceived the presence of the two empires, the archives reveal that for both the Ottomans (operating through Egyptian authority) and the British, the Somali coast was valuable primarily for its strategic location and the benefits it could provide to imperial networks. Yet the standing buildings tell another story: a community that thrived even as its history was marginalized or erased from imperial texts. The Somali traditional leaders' refusal to accept Ottoman–Egyptian claims of sovereignty and their rejection of foreign flags on Somali shores demonstrate a form of incomplete colonization, an assertion of autonomy within the

shadow of empire. Likewise, the early negotiations with the British beginning in 1827 show that Somali elders were fully aware of global shifts and the rise of European colonialism; they resisted subjugation not through large-scale warfare, but through deliberate diplomatic engagement grounded in xeer, Islam, and clan sovereignty.

To read these buildings through a decolonial lens, it is important to acknowledge that many local Somali people do not view the Ottomans as colonizers, and this article does not claim that the Ottomans or Egyptians were colonial in the same way as the British. Rather, it argues that both empires regarded the Somali coast and its people primarily as bargaining tools. A former Ottoman Hall, for example, is today part of the Berbera Museum, reclaiming ownership of a building that stands as a footprint of an empire long gone.



Figure 6. Ottoman Hall of the Turkish Mosque, now part of Berbera Museum, Berbera (2024 photograph). Source: M Womersleys, "Report on the Support....," November 14, 2024

The presence of the Ottomans and the British on the Somali coast, especially in Berbera, can be understood through what Majid Hannoum describes as the "imperial invention of space", a process in which empires create regions and identities that fulfil their own geostrategic needs while disregarding the realities of the Indigenous communities of those regions (Hannoum 2013). Ottoman claims over the Somali coast through Egypt in the 1870s, followed by Berbera becoming a British Protectorate in 1884, transformed the city into a logistical hub connecting the Red Sea, Aden, and the Indian Ocean.

Meanwhile, the architecture along the Berbera coastline reveals what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls "vernacular

cosmopolitanism,” where local communities transform foreign influences rather than passively receiving them. The refusal of Somali clan elders to surrender to Ottoman–Egyptian authority, or to allow the British to enter their land without formal agreement, reflects what Fanon describes as the colonized subject’s refusal to accept the reordering of life under empire (Fanon 1961).

The archival documents show a community that knew where it was negotiating, and negotiating with colonizers is something that the Muslim community in Senegal also did, something close to what the traditional leaders of Berbera did. They neither rejected nor accepted the French colony; rather, they thought about ways they could benefit from the French while also promoting their African–Islamic culture (Diouf 2012). With this historical background, in 1991, Somaliland reclaimed its independence after 31 years (1960–1991) of being united with Somalia. This has more to do with the imperial invention of space: both Somaliland and Somalia’s current geographical locations are a result of Italian and British colonies. Can Somaliland use the archival record and architecture to reclaim its position in the global sphere?

6. Conclusion

Berbera today stands as a hub of history and global transformation. In the twenty-first century, its closeness to the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, a corridor for nearly 10% of global trade and 12% of the world’s seaborne oil, gives Berbera the possibility of becoming a major artery of regional and international commerce (World Bank 2020; EIA 2019). Yet this modern strategic importance is not new. Long before the Ottomans and the British came to Berbera, it was a city that thrived as a cosmopolitan port where Eastern and Western civilizations met, and where Somali traders connected the Horn of Africa to Yemen, Arabia, India, and the wider Indian Ocean world (Alpers 2009; Cambridge History of Africa 1975; Lewis 1998).

Moreover, what this essay shows is that the Ottoman and British architectural remains in Berbera do more than reflect imperial ambitions; they reveal how local Somali communities negotiated, resisted, and transformed those ambitions. Abdelmajid Hannoum’s idea of the *imperial invention of space* illustrates how

both empires attempted to reshape Berbera for their own geopolitical needs (Hannoum 2013). Similarly, through Homi Bhabha's (1994) *vernacular cosmopolitanism*, ideas help to understand how Somalis indigenized foreign architectural forms, turning imperial structures into elements of their own cultural landscape

Ultimately, the story these buildings tell is one of Somali agency. Somali traditional leaders refused to accept Ottoman–Egyptian claims, negotiated with the British from a position of sovereignty, and preserved their own laws (*xeer*) and cultural autonomy (British Government 1827; Qatar Digital Archive 1873). Reading Berbera's architecture through a decolonial lens shows that the empire never fully defined the city; instead, Somalis continuously reshaped imperial space on their own terms. Today, as Berbera rises again as a peaceful and strategic hub in the global economy, its buildings stand as material witnesses to a long history of negotiation, resistance, and transformation that continues to shape its future.

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