

Come back Somalia? Questioning a collapsed state

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Somalia has come to be seen as a prime example of a 'collapsed state'. Together with Liberia, it is a byword for anarchy; 'becoming another Somalia' is the fate to be avoided by every African state. And yet this is what was previously hailed as the most 'unified' state in Africa, free from the ethnic divisions that plague nearly all the others, with a single culture, language and religion. Somalia reminds us to distinguish between the underlying causes of state collapse, and the fault lines along which the collapse occurs. These do not need to be regional, linguistic, religious or 'ethnic'. In Somalia, rivalries between descent groups (clans) served the same purpose.

In this paper I shall consider the process of disintegration, and ask what the prospects for reconstruction are.¹ Though the same general considerations apply to all the Somali territory, I deal only with southern Somalia (the once Italian colony) and have not attempted to look at 'Somaliland', the self-declared republic in the Northwest.

Somalia in 1996

Well before the departure of the last UN troops, Somalia had almost vanished from the international news media. It had its brief period of notoriety, with the famine year of 1991-92, when it was rated second (after Mozambique) in the world scale of human misery, and with the US/UN intervention that followed. Since then, the Somali people have been left, with greatly reduced support and interference from abroad, to struggle with the problem of what comes next.

This is not the place to analyse the international intervention in Somalia, which began in such optimism as the first fruits of the New World Order, and became a chronicle of muddle, waste of resources, and pointless bloodshed, with the forces that had been welcomed as rescuers coming to seem to many of the Somalis as invaders. Politically, the intervention failed entirely to impose any order. At most it 'froze the war in place' for a time. It could point to its humanitarian achievements, but even there the extent has been questioned.² Its main effects were to reinforce the power of the 'warlords' it set out to destroy, establish Somalia's dollar economy, and raise the expectations of various interest groups to a level which could never again be met.

Since then the country remains fragmented. Besides the breakaway Republic of Somaliland in the northwest, there are several *de facto* independent areas. The

former capital and port Mogadishu, with its hinterland, remains split between the factions headed by Cali Mahdi Maxamed and (up to July 1996) by General Maxamed Faarax Caydiid, then by his son Xuseen.³ Each of them attempts to unite the whole country through its own alliance of clan and faction groupings: Caydiid with the Somali National Alliance (SNA) and Cali Mahdi with the Somali Salvation Alliance (SSA). Both claim to head central governments and have distributed ministerial posts to their followers. The Northeast and the port of Boosaaso is controlled by the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF). In the far south, the valley of the Jubba river with its plantations remains divided between the forces of General Maxamed Sayid Xirsi 'Morgan' in the port of Kismaayo, and those of Caydiid's ally, Colonel Axmed Cumar Jees in the hinterland. In the plain between the Jubba and Shabeelle rivers (the centre of the 1992 famine), the Digil-Mirifle or Raxanweyn group of clans set up a supreme council in the town of Baydhaba (Baidoa) to administer the region, but were dislodged when Caydiid took over the town in September 1995. A further splinter group emerged in 1995 when Caydiid split with his former right-hand man, the millionaire businessman Cusmaan Xuseen Cali 'Caato'.

Though the situation in 1996 is peaceful compared to the out and out warfare of 1991-92, spasmodic violence continues between the militias of the SNA and SSA, and between the supporters of Caydiid and those of his former supporter Caato. Both, given the narrowness of their own clan support bases, are becoming increasingly reliant on mercenary militia from other clans. A focus of this conflict is the 'banana war' for the lucrative European export trade from the plantations on the Shabeelle river. The Somalfruit Company, which was established in the 1980s under Siyad Barre, confronts Sombana, a subsidiary of the US Dole company, which began operating in 1993 under cover of the US intervention. Caato has interests in Somalfruit, while Caydiid (and now Xuseen) protect Sombana. Apart from this, there is a lot of simple banditry, with in most areas no legal force able to control it.

And yet economic life goes on and even thrives. Somalia is a place (as the title of an NGO report puts it) of 'paradoxes of private prosperity, poverty pockets, relative vulnerability and public pauperisation'. The centre of Mogadishu may be bombed out, but the markets on the outskirts are busy; there may be no banks but there are plenty of money-changers; with a well functioning, privately run satellite service it is far easier to telephone Somalia than it was before the war. Hotels charge exorbitant prices, even while the roads are lined with beggars, and the aid agencies report high levels of malnutrition.

The events of the last five years have caused massive displacement of people, both within the former borders of Somalia and into Kenya, Ethiopia and Yemen. The towns of Kismaayo in the south and Boosaaso in the northwest, in particular, have their populations swollen with refugees from many different clan groupings.

State and society

Can the Somali state be put together again? Before even asking the question, one needs to see what has disintegrated and why.

The state which has disappeared was, as in most of Africa, an essentially

artificial one, 'suspended above' a society which would never have produced it and did not demand it. This 'mis-match' between state and society is the essence of the problem.⁴ Somali intellectuals are acutely aware of this, most often castigating not so much the inappropriate nature of the state as the divisiveness of their inheritance from a society consisting largely of nomadic livestock herders—the 'nomadic mentality'. Thus for instance Abdalle Omar Mansur: 'The most serious problem in Somalia today is that our cultural traditions are not compatible with the construct of a modern state. We Somalis are prisoners of a culture that we had created in the past and one which we refuse to re-examine...we must reinvent ourselves and in the process launch the construction of a new, viable state.'⁵

As long as the state in question was a colonial one (or rather two colonial ones—the British and the Italian) the mis-match was patent and, in a sense, unproblematic. However, it was continued by the successor, post-colonial nation state, which retained the same centralised structure and even strengthened it. Economically there was really not the base to sustain a state of the kind to which the Somali elite aspired, and the lifestyle to which they became accustomed. Hence it subsisted off foreign aid.

The society over which this state hovered is largely though not exclusively pastoral and nomadic in background and origin, and is effectively structured through clan membership—a system of groups linked genealogically by descent through the male line, both dividing and uniting the Somali nation. I say 'effectively', both in the sense that clanship is a highly effective system; and that those—non-pastoral—sections of Somali society where clanship is less important, are also less powerful, so that other principles of organisation are pushed into the background.

For clan divisions are not the only ones inherited by Somali society. In spite of its reputation for homogeneity it has its cultural and 'ethnic' splits. The dominant tradition is that of pastoral nomadism, and most of the political elite have been from this background or separated from it by only a generation or so; however, beyond the pastoral nomadic clans, there are the farming clans of the south, different from them in history, culture and dialect. Visibly different are the populations of the southern coastal cities who are of Arab–Persian descent, and the so-called 'Bantu' groups, largely the descendants of slaves imported from further down the East African coast. Yet it is precisely *not* along these divisions that the battle lines have been drawn. These 'minority' groups have until recently figured in the civil war only as victims. The fighting has been entirely between people *within* the pastoral–nomadic tradition (including those who are urbanised, but ultimately spring from it). Hence it is *their* clan system that has structured the conflict.

To quote one Somali commentator: 'Because of the strong belief of almost the entire population in clanism as a necessary and inevitable political regime, no political organisation with an open-door non-clan-based membership has yet appeared in the political landscape. Any member of the Somali society who aims for an active political participation is required to present himself as a clan member who plans to foster his clan interest. The notion of politics outside clan affiliations has no roots in our minds.'⁶ It is true that clan ties are manipulated

as a tool by politicians, but they would not be able to do this if those ties were not a reality in peoples minds and lives.

Artificial state and clan-based society, unable to work together healthily, instead set up a poisonous interaction which produced corruption in the state and distortion of the clan-tie. Clans had always competed for resources such as land, grazing and water, but now that control of all these resources and much more was vested in the state, competition between clans, which before had been only one aspect of their existence, became its permanent condition. The state was both the arena within which they fought and the prize for which they contended. So the state, which had been intended to unify the Somali people, actually became the mechanism of their disintegration.

And yet a major theme of Somali history in the last 50 years has been the struggle to transcend the divisive aspect of the clan inheritance and attain a united Somali identity. Independence was won in 1960 on a great wave of enthusiasm for national unity (though one may question how far this wave really carried beyond the intellectual elite). There was a paradox here, since the genealogical model, the myth of common descent, which had been the traditional ideological basis for the unity of the Somali, had to be cancelled, and a new foundation found in Western-derived nationalism. Yet clan-identity remained a basic reality in peoples lives, and determined the politics of the Somali Republic from 1960 to 1969. In that year the military took over and the tired parliamentary democracy found no defenders. The new regime, with General Maxamed Siyad Barre at its head proclaiming 'scientific socialism', staged a 'burial of clanism' with a great flourish of publicity. But what was buried was in fact—as Cabdullaahi Dool points out⁷—only the most trivial and harmless aspects of clanship. All public use of clan names was forbidden; yet all the while Siyad Barre was practising 'clan clientelism', distributing arms and money to his friends, 'encouraging them to attack the common clan enemies who, of course, were accused of divisive "tribalism" by the master tribalist...By destroying his country's economy, Siyad also directly promoted those conditions of general lack of resources and insecurity on which clan loyalty thrives, since clan solidarity offers the only hope of survival.'⁸ At the same time the state undermined the benignant side of the clan system—the customary law (*xeer*) and mechanisms for conflict resolution at the local level. The result was, in Ahmed Samatar's words, 'the perversion of kinship through a decoupling of blood ties (particularly male lineage) from the great civilising or universalising factors of Somali culture: customary law and Islamic precepts. Without these companion moral directives, Somali male behaviour becomes unrestrained and is likely to turn into egotistic criminality.'⁹

Yet, in the same period, new strata had emerged in Somali society. Built into the foundation of the state had been 'the assumption that a minuscule Western-educated class would rule Somalia, since only they could administer a modern state'.¹⁰ Now merchants, bureaucrats and employees of state agencies, the intelligentsia and landowners found their material and social welfare depended on the state, whether as employer or as dispenser of contracts.

The two main sources of the new wealth were foreign aid and land. During the cold-war period came what Anna Simons has called the 'aid avalanche', first

from the West, then from the USSR, and then from the West (principally the USA) again. This wealth was in the gift of those who controlled the state. While those in power made their fortunes,¹¹ for people in the lower government echelons, whose official salaries would hardly feed them for two days, some form of 'corruption' was unavoidable. Those, meanwhile, who did not have access to this fountain of wealth, wondered when their turn would come. With 1992 came another 'aid avalanche', and this time the formerly excluded were determined to get their share and more.

The second source of wealth was the 'land grab'. Large areas of agricultural land, originally mainly in the hands of small subsistence farmers, had been taken over for plantation agriculture by the Italian colonists. After independence, the existing plantations increasingly came into the hands of Somali entrepreneurs. At the same time the expropriation of land from small farmers continued, especially after the passing of the 1975 land law, which, by putting all land in state ownership, actually facilitated takeover by the ruling elite, who were able to manipulate the tenancy rules.

There was certainly an embryonic class structure here; but competition between members of these new strata turned out to be stronger than any emerging sense of common interest. And when they split, they split along clan lines. This was the legacy that 30 years of the post-colonial state—10 under civilian government and 20 under military dictatorship—bequeathed to the Somali people. The state had already in effect collapsed when the disintegration after the flight of Siyad Barre from Mogadishu in January 1991 made the condition plain.

In spite of this, for many people in the urban population before the war, outside the central circle of power, clan identity had become less important. The idealism of the early days of independence, the propaganda of the Siyad Barre years, and the general melting pot effect of urban life, were not without effect. People often knew each other without even wondering about one another's clan origin. One may question whether this meant the real spread of a pan-Somali identity, or was rather the sign of a class unity among the elite. (It is perhaps significant, too, that nearly all the people who have mentioned this to me were women.) In any case, the civil war and its atrocities have torn this emerging unity apart. As one woman said, 'We used not to know our clans. Now we have to.'

Clanship and descent

I have written so far as though the Somali 'clan' was some kind of simple unity. This is far from true, and I must now analyse the system, the 'macro-genealogical grid'¹² in more detail, since it is highly relevant to the present political and military situation. This is not to imply that clanship in itself somehow causes the conflict. It is simply a form of organisation, and in order to follow events in Somalia one needs to understand it, just as one needs to grasp the feudal system to understand mediaeval history, or the operation of the nation state to make sense of events in modern Europe.¹³

The Somali clan system consists of groups based on descent through the male

line. That much is easily grasped by most outsiders. What they commonly find harder to deal with is the way groups recruited in this manner do not remain constant but split up into sub-groups, each with its own life. The UNOSOM command must have felt like the sorcerer's apprentice. This is easier to comprehend when one views the situation not as large groups splitting into fragments, but as small groups forming larger, but intrinsically unstable, combinations. The former UN Envoy to Somalia, Mohamed Sahnoun, was among those non-Somali who made the most genuine efforts to understand this situation; before his recall he compared Somali society to a vase that has been smashed into small fragments. This is a vivid expression of the task he felt he was facing, and is accurate up to a point; but it is also misleading. A vase is not made up of separable components, and when smashed it can break at any point. But the Somali descent system is made to take to pieces. It is more like a scaffolding which has collapsed.

Throughout traditional Somali society, the basic politico-legal unit is the lineage—a group numbering generally a few hundred though sometimes up to 1000–2000 individuals, tracing their descent to a common ancestor anything from six to 14 generations back. The small size of the lineage unit, while making it manageable, also makes it vulnerable; hence it never stands on its own, but exists only in association with other similar units. Lineages are combined into larger units (generally on the basis of sharing a more remote ancestor), and those into larger ones again, in a pyramidal structure. That is to say, smaller groups may at need combine or ally into larger groups, which in turn unite into yet larger units, and so on. However, these larger groupings will fall apart into their constituents when the situation which led them to unite alters, a process of 'constant decomposition and recomposition'.¹⁴ Order and security are thus only achieved through the balance of opposing groups, and the effort to achieve this balance leads to the shifting political alliances that are a common feature of Somali politics. It is when the balance breaks down that conflict follows.

Students of Somali society identify various levels of grouping and use a specialised vocabulary to distinguish them: 'primary', 'secondary' and even 'tertiary' lineages; 'clan' and 'clan-family'—these last being the major groupings of a million or more that make up the Somali people: Daarood, Haawiye, Isaaq, Dir, Digil and Raxanweyn (or Mirifle).¹⁵ Ultimately, according to the genealogical myth, all these are descended from the same ancestor, so that all Somalis are one family. Somalis themselves use terms like *reer* and *quabiil* in a flexible way, without tying them to any particular level—which is not confusing when one lives within the system, since the context makes it clear what one is talking about.

The system grew up in a pastoral traditional situation, and it continues to operate in 'modern' contexts, because it is not only emotionally compelling, but efficient—from the point of view of the individual, an effective method of organising in a situation of competition. It is this very effectiveness, the ease with which it can be used to form a mafia, which makes the descent system so potentially destructive of wider unity, and hence an anathema to nationalists, who yet cannot free themselves from it. Contrary to some journalistic assertions, there is nothing 'irrational' about the clan system. Indeed many of those who

make use of it are being highly 'rational', in the sense of engaging in the calculated pursuit of financial gain. It is notable that when Somalis accuse someone of 'tribalism', what they are generally imputing to him is not blind atavistic loyalty, but self-interest. This is not to deny that belief in common descent and kinship is also a strong emotional force. Indeed it is the interaction of the emotional and the instrumental aspects which gives this form of organisation its power. It is not easy for an outsider to appreciate what it is like to live in a system where the emotional identity is strong, and yet can shift according to context; but I believe that Anna Simons is nearest the mark: 'Genealogy works...mapping trustworthiness —by charting who has trusted whom in the past and where this has led in terms of thicker or thinner, and sustained and broken relationships...Breaks between lineages indicate breaks, or at the least gaps, in trust.'¹⁶

Clans, alliances and factions

In the traditional pastoral situation, competition was (and still is) between relatively small groups in a local setting. The clan-family, that large unwieldy category of tens of thousands of people, scattered across hundreds of miles of territory, never acted as one body—never, for example, went to war all together. Such mobilisation occurred at lower levels of segmentation, between clans or lineages who clashed over matters such as the control of wells or trade routes. In the modern situation, the arena is much larger—hence the need for wider alliances. These have been formed in two modes.

The first applied during the existence of the Somali state, and in the first phase of the civil war. Groups competed at the higher level of descent organisation—the large clans and even the 'clan-family'—a group counting its membership in millions—became the political units. Thus during the time of civilian government the Daarood and Haawiye clan-families competed for government posts. During Siyad Barre's reign it was the Daarood who held power through him—but not all of them. The three clans whom he used as his chief supporters—the 'MOD' alliance—were his own clan the Mareexaan, and the Ogaadeen and Dhulbahante (connected to him through marriage). All these are Daarood, but so are the Majeerteen who became one of the main opposition forces, as eventually did a section of the Ogaadeen. At the same time there was fierce competition *within* these large groupings, between their constituent lineages, for jobs and the spoils of office.

The anti-government movements which overthrew Siyad, only to become the contestants in the civil war, were based on clans or clan-families, but adopted ideological titles in English, shortened to sets of initials. (Several of these organisations had started with a genuine attempt to start a non-clan based movement, but without success.) Thus the United Somali Congress (USC) represents the Haawiye clan-family, the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF) the Majeerteen clan, the Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM) the Ogaadeen clan. Eventually about 10 such movements emerged. Somalia-watchers carry check lists, since there is no logical way of relating the initials to the group they represent. The exception to this is the alliance of the Digil and Mirifle

clan-families, who helpfully named their movement the Somali Democratic Movement (SDM), thus incorporating their real initials. (They had done the same thing 40 years earlier when they fielded a political party.)

In the course of the civil war these larger units divided into two alliances—General Caydiid's Somali National Alliance (SNA), and Cali Mahdi's Somali Salvation Alliance (SSA). These, however, are now formed in the second mode. In every case where an organisation moves into one or other camp, some of its component clans or lineages, with reasons of their own for dissatisfaction, have split off and joined the opposite one. Hence a double list of initials, for instance USC–SNA versus USC–SSA.

The SDM, for instance, originated in a meeting of intellectuals from the Digil–Mirifle group of clans, held in Saudi Arabia in 1987. Unlike most of the other anti-Siyad movements at that time, it was non-violent, and had no militia. It was not until 1991 that the SDM began to raise a militia. During the following years, the Digil–Mirifle territory, round the town of Baydhaba, became the battle ground between Caydiid's forces and those still supporting ex-President Siyad, and was plundered and ravaged by both.

The SDM continued its resistance as a guerrilla force in the bush. In 1992 one of its leaders, Colonel Maxamed Nuur Caliow, asked for support from General Caydiid and his SNA alliance. This, however, did not find favour with his allies, and a split developed between those in the SDM who were in alliance with Caydiid's SNA and those who continued to favour alliance with Cali Mahdi and the SSA. The former consisted mainly of one of the most important Digil clans, the Eelay, together with lineages split from other clans.

There was an attempt to reunify the SDM at a conference held at the village of Bonka near Baydhaba in 1993. The only result of this, however, was to produce yet another faction; one which held aloof from both alliances and attempted to assert the Digil–Mirifle as a third force. It was this organisation that took all the seats in the UNOSOM-organised district councils in the Baydhaba area. Hence there were three SDM factions: SDM–'Manifesto', SDM–SNA and SDM–Bonka.

Thus the clan families and larger clans have progressively split and re-split into their component parts. Each alliance has its 'fifth column' working hard to encourage this process by seducing the sub-clans and lineages of the other, so that what we have now is alliances cutting across clans and clan-families, with splits at every level.

The genealogical grid, far from being a fixed framework which imposes itself on people's behaviour, is manipulated according to political exigencies. An example is the area round the southern port of Kismaayo, where politics are dominated by the power struggle between the two major Daarood groups (both of them immigrants into the area from the northeast region): the Ogaadeen and the 'Harti'. The latter, in the northeast where it originates, is a specific genealogical grouping of four clans only; but in Kismaayo it has become a catch-all term to include all Daarood other than the Ogaadeen, including the genealogically quite distant Mareexaan. The genealogy, in fact, is being manipulated to form an alliance to counterbalance the powerful Ogaadeen.

The change from the old clan system to 'neo-clanism' (in Gerard Prunier's

phrase) has been one of substance as well as form. The clan and the minor groups which make it up used to be self-governing direct democracies; the clan elders, and the local sultans and 'kings' were simply its leading members. These figures are still there, but today it is the politicians and the military leaders who call the tune to which the elders and the sultans are forced to dance. What is noteworthy is that the same form of organisation which worked in the old rural conditions has proved so (disastrously) well adapted to the new ones. Under the centralised state, people had used the clan network to compete by political manoeuvres. With the collapse of government, the means became military. All sorts of resources are in play, but one of the most significant is the control of agricultural land, especially the plantations along the two rivers, since this has led to a major shift of population. Under Siyad, plantation land was held mainly by his fellow-clansmen and protégés; with his fall, 'liberators' from the Haawiye clans took them over. On the Jubba they were driven out again when the Daarood again established their ascendancy; while on the Shabeelle river, the Haawiye—mainly Habar Gidir—took over the plantations and kept them. In either case, people of other groups, the earlier inhabitants of the land, have lost out.¹⁷

The Islamic movements

A significant, though not dominant, element in the Somali political scene are the Islamic movements. This is an important and complex subject, which has not yet been studied with the thoroughness it demands. It can only be touched on here.

Islam is the religion of all the Somali people, whatever clan they belong to, an intrinsic part of their identity. In being thus assimilated and totally part of the national way of life, the faith has inevitably made its compromises with local custom, and certainly many Somalis are less careful in their practice than they are staunch in their allegiance. Nevertheless the Somali people have in the course of their history known many movements intended to revive and purify the faith, of which the best known is that in the early 20th century headed by Sayid Maxamed Cabdille Hassan (the so-called 'mad Mullah'). In his case, as in many others, the determination to reform the people's religious life was associated with resistance to foreign control. The various Islamic movements in Somalia today therefore have a history to draw on. Yet the organisations of today are funded from abroad, and come out of other Islamic traditions than those of Somalia. They appeal to those who see submission to Islamic law in its fullness, as they understand it, as the solution to the lawlessness of the country. In 1996 Islamic groups were in control and Sharia courts were operating in the northeast, in north Mogadishu, in Beled Weyn and Jowhar on the Middle Shabeelle, in Luuq on the Upper Jubba, and in Raas Kaambooni in the far south.

The growth of these movements goes back to the time of Siyad Barre, when they began to flourish in place of the banned political parties, and ever since they have remained linked to certain clan groups. However much a religious movement may reject clanism and try to transcend it, it is almost impossible to avoid running in that groove. The movements are not united (if they were their power would no doubt be greater); there are at least four separate organisations: *Ittihad*

al-Islami (Islamic Union); *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun* (Muslim Brothers); *Wuhdat al-Shabab al-Islami* (Union of Islamic Youth); *Majma al-Ulama* (Union of the Clerics).¹⁸ All of them are receiving funds from overseas, but not all from the same sources. They differ in their programmes and objectives, and in their degree of acceptance by the people. Al-Ittihad, funded from Saudi Arabia, is the group most active in the northeast; they are also the predominant group in the Kismaayo zone. The organisation in charge in Luuq on the Upper Jubba on the other hand has Iranian backing.¹⁹

Probably the most significant of all is the Sharia court set up by Al Ittihad in North Mogadishu, the zone under the authority of Cali Mahdi's USC. In calling in this group to control the lawlessness of the streets he has found a powerful ally, but one which shows signs of becoming his master. The court is supported morally and financially by Saudi Arabia and Sudan. It has succeeded—where UNOSOM failed—in disarming the local population. It controls the airport, the barriers between North and South Mogadishu, and the police. The official line about the North Mogadishu court is that it is a branch of the SSA administration, along with other ministries. It has been called in on a temporary basis—by this account—to deal with the lawless situation, and once a regular government is established, 'the people' will decide if the court should keep its power or have it curtailed. But one may doubt whether this would in fact be so easy.

There is no dispute that, where the Islamic courts rule, there is a measure of peace and security, and hence they enjoy much public support. Punishments such as amputation and stoning to death, which outrage opinion in Europe and the USA, are not unpopular with the Somali public, since they are seen as bringing safety to the streets.

There are critical voices however. 'It is not the Sharia itself that is wrong but the way these groups handle it. They cut off the hand of a poor boy who steals a banana—but people who steal millions are still doing business.' There is distrust of their political agenda. 'They are exploiting the funds from foreign countries. They lead to fighting of brother against brother. They only succeed due to poverty.' Many are affronted at the idea of presuming to 'islamise' an already Muslim nation. Uncommitted opinion is perhaps best summed up by the man who said that if he had to choose between the court and anarchy, he would choose the court. In 1996 it seemed that the Islamic organisations remained 'a factor, but not a major factor in the situation—in default of other attractive options.'²⁰

What prospects for peace?

Among many Somalis there is a mood of despair: 'People here have no faith in the future'. Yet the corollary of this is a war-weariness which may itself be a force for peace. 'They destroy, destroy', said a woman who had lost eight of her relatives; 'we'vihad it up to here'. Both inside Somalia and among the Somalis of the diaspora, there is a recognition that they will not achieve their aims through military means: 'They used to run towards the sound of fighting—but now they run away. People abroad used to raise funds for their groups, but now that feeling is dying. Now they are talking about "peace with our neighbours".'

What form could such a peace take? Would reconciliation between the SNA and the SSA be enough? Must 'Somaliland' in the northwest be involved, or should it go its own way? Would it mean agreement on a central authority, or agreement to do without one?

There are efforts towards reconciliation going on, a whole range of initiatives by groups of politicians and intellectuals, both in Somalia (eg between north and south Mogadishu) and overseas. 'We are trying to bring together twelve to twenty-four "clean" people, such as former statesmen, who could be the link between the international community and the Somalis, who can advise the international community and the regions.'²¹ 'A conference of selected leaders from each clan; genuine representatives of the people—100 people maximum.'²²

Perhaps more importantly, at the local level there are real peace initiatives by genuine 'elders', for instance those of the Xawaadle and Habar Gidir in Beled Weyn, who in April 1996 made a pact to seek for peace, rejecting the politicians who they claim do not represent them. At another level deals are done by the more powerful merchants, such as those who formed a 'Peace Committee' in Mogadishu, needing stability to run their business.

Women and women's groups are often cited as a force for peace. This is not necessarily so. Women have been no less partisan than men. Here as in other wars, women have egged their menfolk on (their traditional role in Somali warfare); helped them, as when General Morgan used women to bring guns and munitions into Kismaayo under their robes; and on occasion fought and killed. It is true that women have an equally well established peace-making role. Because Somalis (especially among the pastoralists) generally marry outside their clan, it follows that women have ties to both their own and their husband's clan, and so are both motivated to help in reconciliation, and useful as go-betweens. In traditional society, when peace was established between two groups, women from one group were often married into the other as a sign of reconciliation (which in fact means men using women for diplomatic purposes).

The experience of the sufferings of war has turned women's minds to this peace-making function, while at the same time they have acquired new roles in organised groups. The support given by international agencies to such groups has enabled them to take part in peace conferences like that at Addis Ababa in 1993 (where some of them went on a nine-day hunger strike), and to travel as far as Beijing. However, such groups are mostly clan-tied just as the religious organisations are. The activity of women's NGOs in the humanitarian and medical fields is notable; but it may be that in the long run they will have more significance for the history of gender relations in Somali society than for the peace process.

Finally, forces outside Somalia itself may be crucial in any peace process. The United Nations, putting the fiasco of armed intervention behind it, continues to play a little publicised role, encouraging peace initiatives. So do other international bodies, such as the European Union and the Arab League (to which Somalia used to belong). Somali intellectuals generally believe that these organisations, and others such as the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) as well as their neighbouring countries, should play a more active role (for instance by imposing an effective arms embargo). Some even argue that the UN should assume a trusteeship role.

While the real effectiveness of these large international bodies may be doubted, operating as they do mainly at the level of politicians and roving intellectuals, smaller aid organisations, both non-governmental and offshoots of the UN like UNICEF, play an important part on the ground. In the absence of functioning state institutions, they not only provide essential services, especially medical ones, but in a sense can be said to assume some state functions—since the priorities for aid and development are set, not by the Somalis but by the organisations. They can take on the task of building up local institutions with administrative functions, as does the Swedish Life and Peace Institute, which has been helping to organise local councils at grassroots level.

At the same time, these organisations too become associated with particular clan groups, which benefit both from their services and from the employment they offer. Willy-nilly the NGOs find themselves identified with ‘their’ clans. Hence some clans have waged inter-clan warfare by driving out one another’s NGOs. (General Morgan has reportedly been very successful in this tactic in Kismaayo.) Caydiid’s government meanwhile imposed a registration system on NGOs. So aid organisations become players in the game, rather than arbitrators.

There is, then, not only a general craving for peace but a number of initiatives working to attain it. All these efforts face formidable obstacles, however.

We do not need to suppose that the cause of the violence is simply the national character—though it is a view expressed not only by stereotyping foreigners, but by embittered Somalis: ‘The great obstacle is the Somalis—they become wild, they have to fight every day.’ There are enough other difficulties. There is the absence of legitimate recognised political representatives among the Somalis. Who has the right to represent whom? Who has the authority to enforce an accord? (This is what wrecked the UNOSOM-sponsored conferences.) The public do not necessarily obey either elders or politicians; nor do the militias obey their commanders unless it suits them. As Colonel Jeas reportedly said to a UN representative: ‘If only I could make my militia do what they don’t want to do...’ Partly this has to do with the non-hierarchical nature of Somali society, partly also with the poor quality of leadership and the lack of trust people feel in their politicians. The gap in communication is increased now that many of the politicians live outside the country.

There is the seemingly limitless supply of arms available—both the heavy weaponry left over from the Siyad Barre period, and the light arms and ammunition that continue to flood in unchecked. There are the powerful vested interests in the absence of law—‘warlords’ and militia leaders, the young men who find living by the gun more profitable and more fun than herding camels, or who have no other employment; mafia-like gangs who run protection rackets. Another set of people who, while they need peace, have reason to fear what a rule of law might bring, is those who have taken over property—whether real estate in Mogadishu, pasture lands or plantations. Those who have profited do not want the process reversed.

The building up of local coalitions, such as those of the Daarood in the northeast and along the Jubba, is liable to be seen as—indeed to be—not a ‘first step’ to national unity but an alliance threatening others, a preparation for war, not peace. There are limitations, too, on local grassroots initiatives and reliance

on local elders. These men do not necessarily have the authority they once enjoyed, in the face of militia leaders and armed gangs of youths. Moreover local elders are not always as local or as traditional as they seem—they may be part of an armed land takeover.

There is a problem with the continuing involvement of the United Nations and the EU—apart from the fact that many Somalis regret the ‘gravy days’ of 1992–93, and would like a higher level of commitment from them. This is that they are—correctly—seen as siding with the SSA against the SNA. There are historical reasons for this since it was Ali Mahdi’s government which originally called in the UN, and it is understandable given Caydiid’s behaviour, but it undermines their standing as an impartial force.

Finally, there is the dream of national unity, or command. In the absence of a common enemy or a nationwide consensus, unity can only come by force, that is to say by conquest. This was Caydiid’s method, perhaps one he saw as compelled by the supreme need to unite the country. In practice, however, it means that unification is not the guarantor but the chief enemy of peace.

Meanwhile the two alliances continue their confrontational rhetoric, even though both are riven with divisions. The SNA has, one might say, too much leadership, the SSA too little. The SSA tries desperately to forge a real common policy from a mixture of groups with different agendas, a point made contemptuously by the other side: ‘They have no proper principles, no leader no platform. All they can do is criticise. We don’t recognise them as a political association. Like people in London—Hyde Park. We ignore them—that is our policy.’²³ The SNA, on the other hand, was overwhelmingly identified with its leader, Caydiid, and it remains to be seen if it can hold together in his absence.

For many, Caydiid himself was the main obstacle to peace. ‘Caydiid is behaving like a bandit—we have tried and tried to cooperate, but people are losing patience. In the last resort we will have to use the same methods he does to defeat him.’²⁴ To some he seemed an unstoppable force, capturing one city after another until he appeared about to take over the whole of southern Somalia. Others however pointed out that he only partially controlled the territory he claimed—‘he relies on splinter groups’—that, though he had plenty of weaponry, his limited manpower was overstretched, that he owed his success to the lack of unity of the other side, and that his military domination had not been translated into a civilian administration. ‘It is important not to confuse the power to attack and destroy with the power to govern.’²⁵ He was described not unjustly as yesterday’s man, still living in the 1980s in the world where to be president was the key to limitless foreign aid. As an EU representative said, ‘He doesn’t realise nobody is interested any more’. His death was followed by confident prophecies that the way would be open for everyone else to reach a settlement. Such hopes are unlikely to be fulfilled.

Conclusion: good fences make good neighbours

It is clear that the old days of the centralised state are gone: ‘We must never go back to over-centralisation. People want a large say in their local affairs, without imposing a will from the top.’²⁶ Behind this is the premise that ‘a

centralised government *necessarily* favours one clan.²⁷ ‘Federalism’ and ‘decentralisation’ are the words on everyone’s lips. Even the SNA think along these lines, in spite of Caydiid’s denunciation of the ‘dismembering’ of Somalia, and their refusal to join in any discussions on the topic: ‘Our policy is decentralising—federalisation with regional autonomy.’²⁸

The problem is what these words will mean in practice. Exiled politicians and intellectuals endlessly debate the possibilities. Should there be a federation of five states, or four, or three? Should its components be based on clanship, or territory, since every piece of territory can be claimed by two or more clans, while clans and clan-families are geographically scattered? Now that the clan map has been redrawn, would the federal entities follow the old map or the new? How can their boundaries be agreed upon?

While the intellectuals and politicians argue, the people on the ground make their own arrangements. As one young man put it: ‘Because of the past five years, Somalis have come to rely on themselves, and this is working. No one is helping them, there is no government—and business is booming and everyone is working for him or herself, there is no welfare system. So who is interested in government? No one is interested. We only need a government to represent the name of Somalia—we don’t need one which interferes in the affairs of the people.’

The most convincing, and generally agreed, proposition is that reconstruction must start from the bottom level. Many would concur with the leader of a women’s organisation: ‘I don’t believe the country can be united in the near future. It should be built up from the bottom from the smallest possible neighbourhoods or villages.’ There are even calls for what is in effect a return to traditional *xeer* law: ‘Each clan should sort itself out and neighbouring clans should have arrangements for compensation.’

Unity by consent may come at some future time, the genuine underlying sense of Somali identity reassert itself, but the reality in the meantime is the patchwork of ‘clan mini-states’, and the old logic of the genealogical grid: that people unite to confront a common enemy, then split up again.²⁹ The absence of a state structure with which to conduct relations poses a problem for foreign governments and the UN, but it is one they are already beginning to address. The immediate issue before the Somali people (as perhaps before those of other collapsed states) is whether this non-unity can find its own stability, with good governance at local level. The setting up of local councils is designed to lead to such an outcome. The question is whether such units can keep within and between them, if not total peace, then enough of it to make life livable. If they cannot, then the prospects for eventual reunification will also be poor.

Notes

¹ The research for this paper was carried out in January–May 1996, thanks to a MacArthur NGO Visiting Fellowship at the Department of War Studies, King’s College, London. Interviews were held in Nairobi, Mogadishu, Kismaayo and Marka in February 1996.

² According to one donor ‘The number of Somali lives saved by the intervention of UNITAF/UNOSOM is

- probably only a small fraction of what is claimed...Much of the work had been done already in the latter half of 1992, by UNICEF and various NGOs with airlifts and public health inputs.' J Prendergast *The Gun Talks Louder than the Voice*, Washington, DC: Centre of Concern, 1994, p 5. Another view is that aid as a whole caused the famine rather than curing it; this is argued, for instance, by Sam Riley in *The Times*, 25 April 1996: 'In 1992 a short famine in Somalia caused by civil war...was deliberately manipulated by the warlords, because the ICRC and other agencies, under the glare of TV lights, would pay any price to feed Somalis, in a year in which domestic food production was in surplus...spending \$100 000 a week on "protection" in Mogadishu, the ICRC gave the warlords a financial incentive to maintain starvation at the highest possible level. Far fewer might have perished if the famine had been ignored entirely.'
- ³ The Somali language has its own standard spelling system, and I have used it here for personal and place names. It may strike the English reader as odd at first, but not more so than, eg Portuguese or Danish, and if names in those languages are normally spelt in the native manner I do not see why the same should not apply to Somali. I have made an exception of 'Mogadishu' (rather than 'Muqdisho'), on the grounds that this form, like 'Warsaw' or 'Munich', has become an English convention. The English reader should bear in mind that: (i) 'x' stands for the 'voiceless pharyngeal fricative', an h-like sound made at the back of the throat; hence Xasan = Hassan; (ii) 'c' is the sound 'ayn, found in Arabic, but inaudible to most Europeans; hence Cali = Ali, Caydiid = Aydid. A problem with personal names is that Somalis on the international scene (particularly those who grew up before the Somali writing system was introduced in 1972) habitually spell their names in the English or Italian style. Here I have used the Somali spelling when referring to a person or quoting an interview, but retained the anglicised form when citing a written work.
- ⁴ M Doornbos & J Markakis, 'Society and state in crisis: what went wrong in Somalia?', MA Mohamed Salih & L Wohlgenuth (eds), *Crisis Management and the Politics of Reconciliation in Somalia*, Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1994, p 16.
- ⁵ Abdalle Omar Mansur 'Contrary to a nation: the cancer of the Somali state', in Ali Jimale Ahmed (ed) *The Invention of Somalia*, Lawrenceville, Red Sea Press, 1995, p 115.
- ⁶ Abdi A Mohamed ('Baffo'), 'Some reflections on current Somali politics and its future directions', presentation at the Nairobi Peace Forum, 1995, p 8.
- ⁷ Cabdullaahi Dool, *Soomaaliya: Maxay Kala Tirsaneysaa Maryooley?* (Somalia: what does it mean to the ordinary person?) London: Horn Heritage, 1995, p 32.
- ⁸ IM Lewis, 'Segmentary nationalism and the collapse of the Somali state; in *Blood and Bone*, Lawrenceville, Red Sea Press, 1994, p 231.
- ⁹ Ahmed I Samatar (ed), *The Somali Challenge: From Catastrophe to Renewal*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1994, p 9.
- ¹⁰ Doornbos & Markakis, 'Society and state in crisis', p 14.
- ¹¹ A leaked 1991 World Bank document on public expenditure management makes it clear that the budget of virtually every ministry and project was plundered by the families that dominated the government. Of the expenditure aggregate about a quarter appears as 'unidentified' ie embezzled. Scams involving state farms are detailed in K Menkhaus & K Craven, 'Land alienation and the imposition of state farms in the lower Jubba valley', in C Besteman & LV Cassanelli, *The Struggle for Land in Southern Somalia: the War Behind the War*, Boulder, CO/London, Westview Press/Haan, 1996.
- ¹² B Helander, 'Vulnerable minorities in Somalia and Somaliland', *Indigenous Affairs* (Copenhagen), No 2, 1995, p 21.
- ¹³ Such a system is not unique to the Somali—the same sort of thing exists for instance among Bedouin Arabs. But the political system in the Arab nations is not generally dominated by people of Bedouin background, as is the case in Somalia.
- ¹⁴ Mohamed Abdi Mohamed 'Crise d' identite en Somalie', paper given to the European Association of Somali Studies Conference, London, 1993, p 14.
- ¹⁵ The problem with referring to a grouping like the Haawiye or Isaaq as a 'clan', as the European and US media have become accustomed to do, is that to an ordinary Westerner this suggests a strong degree of cohesion and common organisation, perhaps even a single leader. It has to be emphasised that in traditional Somali society this is not the case; these high-level groups have never been anything but unstable alliances.
- ¹⁶ A Simons, *Networks of Dissolution; Somalia Undone*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995, p 139.
- ¹⁷ On this whole subject see Besteman & Cassanelli, *The Struggle for Land*; and R Omaar & A de Waal, 'Land tenure, the creation of famine, and prospects for peace in Somalia' (Discussion Paper No 1), London: African Rights, 1993 (reprinted in Mohamed Salih & Wohlgenuth, *Crisis Management*).
- ¹⁸ Mohamed Abdi Mohamed, 'Crise d' identite en Somalie', p 11.
- ¹⁹ A Cairo broadcast declared there were camps for Islamic extremists near Luuq, containing people of many nationalities (swb 10 July 1996).
- ²⁰ Hassan Cali Mirre, interview.
- ²¹ Maxamed Abshir 'Waldo', interview.
- ²² Dr Hassan Sh Ibraahim, interview.
- ²³ M Qanyere Afrah, interview.
- ²⁴ Xuseen Xaaji Maxamed, 'Bood', interview.

²⁵ K Menkhous, unpublished field trip report: 'Somalia', September 1994, p 12.

²⁶ Ambassador Cabdille Ismaaciil, interview.

²⁷ P Stahl, 'Somali proposals for federal structures of governance in Somalia', Mogadishu, Policy and Planning Group, UNOSOM II, 1994, p 2.

²⁸ Maxamed Qanyere Afrah, interview.

²⁹ See IM Lewis, 'The uncentralised Somali legacy', in *A Study of Decentralised Political Structures for Somalia: A menu of Options*, report prepared by consultants from the London School of Economics and Political Science, 1995.

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