

**C**lan *Cleansing in Somalia* is a powerful and richly documented contribution to the growing body of scholarship on the causes of the recent Somali crisis. It strives to make the case that ‘clan-cleansing’ was a central component in the strategy of the warlords who seized power in Mogadishu following the overthrow of dictator Mohamed Siyad Barre in January 1991, and that the legacy of their actions has been a major reason for Somalia’s failure to repair its fractured society ever since. While the notion of ‘ethnic cleansing’ was popularized by the international media during the civil wars which followed the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the concept was not extended to the inter-clan violence which was occurring in Somalia at the same time. In her provocative study, Kapteijns argues that the victors in Somalia’s struggle for power in 1991 sought not only to eliminate the remaining supporters of the former Siyad regime but also to expel from southern Somalia all those who belonged to the ex-President’s Daarood clan, using a systematic campaign of anti-Daarood propaganda to mobilize civilians to assist in the violent purges. For the author, such actions clearly qualify as a case of ethnic cleansing; and she draws upon the wider comparative literature on mass communal violence, stigmatization of ‘outsiders,’ and ‘mythico-histories’ to suggest that Somalia’s factional leaders in the early 1990s behaved in ways not so different from other ethnic hate-mongers around the world.

Needless to say, the book has already generated controversy, particularly in Somali circles. While many praise its unflinching call for Somalis to confront the destructive consequences of blind clan loyalty, others have denounced it – in public conferences and on Somali internet sites – for being partisan, claiming that the author places much of the blame for the ethnic-cleansing campaign on Mohamed Farah Aidid’s United Somali Congress and its largely Hawiye clan supporters, though she certainly does not let other parties off the hook. Kapteijns, who is the Kendall-Hodder Professor of History at Wellesley College, is not a newcomer to the Horn of Africa. Over her long professional career, she has researched and written on Sudanese history, on the historiography of Somalia’s civil war, and on Somali women’s poetry. She is fluent in Arabic and Somali and is associate editor of *Halabuur*, a respected cultural and literary journal based in Djibouti. Thus her research and arguments warrant serious attention even from those who may disagree with her conclusions.

In *Clan Cleansing*, Kapteijns contends that the scale and character of the 1991-92 communal violence in Somalia constituted a new and disturbing turn – a ‘key shift’, as she terms it – in the use of clan labels to distinguish friends from foes. The warlords who replaced the old regime were determined to establish their

political supremacy (and, I would add, their territorial rights) over Mogadishu and other strategic districts in southern Somalia. To achieve their goals, they redefined the entire Daarood clan as the ‘enemy’, as outsiders who had dominated and oppressed the other clans of Somalia for most of its modern history. In contrast to previous instances of inter-clan violence, where clansmen had often been mobilized to oppose a particular government or where governments had taken punitive actions against the kinsmen of its political opponents, the 1991 incidents marked, in the author’s words, a ‘new kind of collective, clan-based violence.’ Even as the new power brokers labeled all Daarood as enemies of the country, they readily embraced as allies many non-Daarood leaders and generals who had served the old regime and been complicit in its human rights abuses. This decisive break with the older politics of cross-clan negotiations and compromise produced, in Kapteijns’ view, a social divide and a ‘moral disrepair’ from which Somalis have yet to recover and which continue to hinder efforts at national reconciliation.

Kapteijns does not fail to point out that ‘collective punishment’ targeted toward civilians had precedents in Somalia’s twentieth-century history. It was used periodically by British and Italian colonial governments to subdue dissident clans, and was increasingly deployed during the later Siyad Barre years as a way of squashing political dissent. But these historical precedents, according to the author, did not reach the level of the ‘ethnic cleansing’ perpetrated by the warlords in 1991. Because the latter occurred outside the mediating institutions of the state, and because the new warlords sought to deploy ordinary civilians as agents in the perpetration of violence against their rivals, the 1991-92 episodes were qualitatively different from earlier forms of collective violence which had pitted the state against its enemies. Now it was clan vs. clan, and a new discourse (deploying ‘mythico-histories’ and ‘hate-narratives’) supplied the rationale for eliminating anyone belonging to the opposing clan.

The book has a great deal to commend it. To begin with, Kapteijns situates her



## Dark Days in Somalia

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### Clan Cleansing in Somalia: The Ruinous Legacy of 1991

by Lidwien Kapteijns

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account of Somalia’s 1991 violence in the wider comparative literature on genocide and ethnic cleansing. Both the Introduction and the concluding chapter make reference to recurrent patterns of collective mobilization, scapegoating, and myth-making which have typically preceded outbreaks of inter-ethnic or genocidal violence around the world. By bookending her detailed account of clan-cleansing in Somalia with comparative material, the author forces Somalia specialists to rethink the Somali ‘exceptionalism’ which has characterized so much previous scholarship on that country. One of the author’s major goals is clearly to confront Somali experts (and Somali apologists themselves) with the reality that the mobilization of ‘clan’ identities produced the same kind of collective self-destruction that ‘tribal’ or ethnic wars did in other countries.

At the same time, the author provides a welcome corrective – if one is still needed – to lingering understandings of Somali clan identities as natural or primordial. She challenges several generations of Somali studies specialists who have used the concept of ‘clan’ to explain everything from the dysfunctional nature of the national state to the violent bloodletting which ensued upon its collapse. Citing the work of Martin Shaw, Alexander Hinton, and others who have examined the subject comparatively, Kapteijns asserts that episodes of ethnic (or clan) cleansing are fundamentally political acts, that is, ‘instruments’ to mobilize supporters in the struggle for political power. She understands ‘clan’ as a construct – a powerful one, to be sure – which was employed by unscrupulous political entrepreneurs for purposes of gaining and holding power. She contends that violence was not perpetrated by clans but rather by ‘political leaders who used people to commit violence in the name of clan’, thereby reframing the question from ‘why do clans fight’ to ‘why do clansmen (sometimes) respond to appeals to fight against other clans’. Her answer is that 1991 provided a situation where multiple grievances and opportunities for revenge converged. The end result was a ‘key shift’, the emergence of a new axis of conflict where the enemy was no longer a clan-dominated government but rather the entire clan.

For a subject which has been dominated by the analyses of foreign

experts or Somali diaspora scholars, *Clan Cleansing* does us the service of allowing local Somali voices to weigh in on the causes and consequences of the conflict. In Chapter 1 (‘Speaking the Unspeakable’), the author draws on Somali-language sources – contemporary oral poetry and written fiction, oral interviews, news reports, and radio recordings – to provide a ‘grass-roots’ view of the violence both at the time of the ‘cleansing’ and in survivors’ subsequent reflections upon it. Kapteijns provides readers with English translations of a number of quite powerful poems composed during or in the immediate aftermath of the collective bloodletting of 1991. She includes several popular poems which denounce clannism and the violence it can provoke, and others which were clearly intended to inflame clan hatreds. The latter are what Somalis call *gubaabo qabiil* (translated by the author as ‘poetry which takes sides’, lit. ‘tribal poetry’), and one suspects this type of composition was far more common during the period of clan cleansing than the more conciliatory verses of well-known Somali poets living in the diaspora which Kapteijns highlights. Indeed, as students of Somali culture know, some of the best classical Somali poetry – ‘prestigious’ poetry as the author terms it – has been distinctly partisan, using memorable phrases and rich allusions to cast aspersions on rival clans and to mobilize the poet’s kinsmen to take up arms against them. Even memorable poems which criticize clan xenophobia rarely name specific clan leaders or politicians as provocateurs; and poets who have acquired a reputation for ‘universality’ have been more apt to testify to the horrors of war or to lament the fate of the nation than to attempt to mediate the conflicts or critique their own kinsmen for the misfortunes which have afflicted the country. Despite the author’s contention that contemporary poets have a mediating role to play in restoring the national psyche, persuasive verse remains a ‘double-edged’ sword in Somali political culture, just as likely to call its audiences to fight as to seek peace.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide, respectively, a useful summary of the historical background to the events of 1991-92, and an extensive chronicle of the collective violence which occurred during those years, as reported in the popular media or recalled by victims or witnesses. While general readers may be overwhelmed by the dozens of shocking examples of inter-clan violence (including rapes, assaults, and mass executions), Kapteijns’ efforts to document these episodes will provide future scholars and human rights investigators with an invaluable record of the horrors of the era. While critics may argue that her account leaves out significant atrocities committed against ‘their’ own kinsmen, the weight of the cumulative evidence supports Kapteijns’ contention that a systematic campaign aimed at purging Mogadishu and Kismayo and parts of Gaalkayo of their Daarood residents certainly took place, even if other forms

of violence (family vendettas, rapes and armed robberies by undisciplined youths, militia assaults on minorities) were occurring simultaneously. As the author notes, the 1991 situation provided plenty of ‘opportunity with impunity’ for those with weapons, even if they were not part of a conscious ethnic-cleansing campaign.

Several important patterns and insights emerge from the author’s grim chronicle, often pointing to suggestive parallels with other well-known instances of violence associated with ethnic or clan-cleansing. For example, it appears that the most extreme cases of inter-clan violence occurred in those districts of the country where Somalis of diverse clans had previously co-existed, intermarried, and worked together (most notably in the cosmopolitan cities of Mogadishu and Kismayo). In these districts, one might expect that clan consciousness had receded and the likelihood of inter-clan violence reduced. In fact, as the author suggests, in such mixed-clan settings the need to expel ‘neighbors’ who belonged to other clans was even more imperative in order to undo the former ‘lived realities’ of peaceful coexistence, to make a decisive break with the shared past. This phenomenon has clear parallels with the events in Rwanda and Bosnia, where long-time neighbors turned on each other in the pursuit of ethnic exclusivity.

Kapteijns’ narrative also points up the concerted efforts by propagators of ethnic/clan cleansing to eliminate or marginalize ‘moderate’ Somali voices – there were apparently quite a number – which called for negotiation and compromise. These included many educated professionals and middle-class businessmen in Kismayo, who were rounded up and executed by USC militiamen in what may have been the most egregious instance of clan-cleansing. One readily recalls similar efforts to suppress the conciliatory voices of ‘moderate’ Hutus during the Rwanda genocide, as well as in Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge campaigns, where anyone who questioned the need to ‘purify’ the community was suspected of lacking commitment to the cause.

The author’s findings suggest that virtually every member of the ex-dictator’s extended Daarood clan was vulnerable to violent reprisals: the perpetrators targeted even those Daarood who had opposed the former government or who had no official association with it. Most revealingly, the author shows that the ‘cleansing’ was organized and systematic – neighbors were urged to help the militias identify the enemy, and big ‘D’s for Daarood were painted on victims’ houses – in

contrast to common depictions of the killings as random and spontaneous. Here again the lessons of Rwanda are clear: post-genocide research in that country has revealed the extent to which the mass killings were both systematic and planned in advance by a hard core of militant Hutu supremacists.

One of the most chilling aspects of the book is the author’s discovery and discussion of the ‘clan hate-narratives’ which were repeatedly used by leaders in public speeches and media forums to instigate civilian populations to violence. They included: a) the use of derogatory terms taken from popular culture and applied wholesale to characterize entire ‘clans’; b) the use of narratives of belonging (autochthony) and outsidership (allochthony) to stir xenophobia aimed at expelling all who were not born in a particular district, and c) the compression of complex inter-communal histories into incendiary phrases like ‘a hundred years of Daarood domination’ to justify ousting the latter. I was not fully convinced that ordinary Somali civilians were heavily indoctrinated or deeply committed to exterminating their Daarood neighbors. Even from the evidence provided by the author, it seems that most (though certainly not all) of the violence was perpetrated by undisciplined young militiamen who were recruited from the bush by the warlords and who had *not* been co-residents of the victims. Certainly there was complicity by neighbors and former associates in identifying the clan affiliations of potential victims, in not coming to their assistance when they were attacked, or in simply ‘looking the other way’. Yet even in the Rwanda genocide, considered the archetype of mass communal violence, experts have estimated that only 8-10 per cent of the civilian population engaged actively in mass killings.

In sum, I believe that Kapteijns makes her case that a form of ethnic (clan) cleansing – defined as ‘rendering an area ethnically homogeneous by using force or intimidation’ – took place in the immediate aftermath of Somalia’s state collapse in 1991. I also find plausible her argument that the violence of 1991 was different from earlier forms of collective violence because it was employed by ethnic provocateurs outside of the institutions of the state which had formerly mediated inter-clan relations; because it called on civilians to become perpetrators of the violence, making it a communal rather than a strictly political struggle; and because it was accompanied by a new discourse pitting clan against clan, rather than clan against the instruments of state. Where

I disagree with the author is in her contention that the ‘key shift’ of 1991 marked a decisive transformation of politics in Somalia. Kapteijns argues that the ‘conflict identities’ produced during the clan-cleansing campaign continue to shape the mindset and political behavior of Somalis into the present, preventing any serious chance for national reconciliation. I would argue instead that Somali clan leaders rather quickly returned to a politics of negotiation and cautious compromise with their former enemies. That such efforts have not produced a formula for ‘national-level’ governance says more about Somali attitudes toward a strong state than it does about their attitudes toward other clans.

If one were to look at the twenty-five years before 1991 and the nearly twenty-five years which have elapsed since, would we reach a different conclusion? Might we not say that the inter-communal violence which exploded in 1991-92 – fueled, to be sure, by political entrepreneurs of all parties eager to capture the collapsing state – was a temporary phenomenon, replaced subsequently by a return to a more pragmatic and therefore less predictable politics of opportunism? Many Daarood – including Majertejn from today’s Puntland and even members of the ex-dictator’s Marehan clan – were able to return to Mogadishu as early as 1993, when clan mobilization decreased and old contacts and friendships were reactivated. Victorious Hawiye warlords and members of the business community in the Somali capital clearly found it advantageous to welcome back former Daarood associates from Gaalkayo and Bosaso, and more recently to encourage investments in the city by members of the diaspora from other clans, because such partnerships gave the new overlords access to ports and markets in other regions of the country. The ouster of the formerly dominant Daarood had served its purpose: once the Hawiye had established *their* control over Mogadishu (and other strategic districts in southern Somalia), past alliances and associations could be safely reactivated, and Mogadishu could once again be opened as a multi-clan marketplace – albeit now under an Hawiye political umbrella. This is precisely what one would expect from the author’s description of the opportunism of Somali politicians and entrepreneurs who had been loyal to the Siyad regime but were welcomed into the new dispensation because of their usefulness to the new power brokers.

The point here is that the public ‘hate narratives’ and rampant atrocities in the name of clan in 1991-92 were relatively short-lived. What survived, I think, and

what has hindered political reconciliation in Somalia since the fall of Siyad Barre, is the resolute refusal of Somalis from all clans to accept a national government ruled by leaders of another clan. This may explain why the current political roadmap for Somalia’s recovery seems to favor a ‘weak’ federal model, with highly autonomous ‘regional states’ under the control of one’s own clan politicians, for better or worse. What Somalis continue to face in 2014, it seems to me, is a crisis of state more than a crisis of inter-clan relations, which continue to be joined on pragmatic grounds and hence to be constantly in flux, and invariably negotiable. While Somali politicians refuse to compromise over the makeup of any proposed *national* government, Somalis from different clans seem perfectly capable of co-existing residentially, co-operating economically, and unifying periodically when the country is threatened or invaded by outsiders.

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*Clan Cleansing in Somalia* is well-written and mostly jargon-free. The reader always knows where the argument is going and how the author intends to utilize the anecdotes she marshals to illustrate the broader claims made. It will hold great interest for scholars and advanced students of communal conflict, of ‘failed states’, and of ethnic entrepreneurs in modern African politics. And because it deals unflinchingly with the hate narratives and mythico-histories which helped to rationalize and instigate mass violence against fellow citizens, it will certainly continue to provoke lively discussions amongst Somali readers – both supporters and critics of the author’s conclusions. In the last chapter, the author poses important questions about collective vs. individual responsibility for war crimes, and discusses the difficulties of implementing any type of transitional justice mechanisms in a situation where memories of past violence remain so contested. While she acknowledges that historians’ ‘truth’ may carry less weight than the multiple and conflicting memories that Somalis themselves hold of their past, she nonetheless calls upon all parties to engage in ‘critical memory work’ which confronts the ‘illusion of collective innocence.’ The work of mediating the memories of past violence falls to all of us – academics, journalists, poets, novelists (both Somalis and foreigners) – who must strive in their thinking and writing to disrupt the ‘sterile recycling of group hate- and victimological narratives.’ This is a huge challenge, raised by a brave and compelling book.

