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The Somali Question

Abdi M. Kusow
Iowa State University
kusow@iastate.edu

More than half a century ago, Frantz Fanon made two pivotal observations about cataclysmic convulsions that would engulf Central and Eastern Africa. The first referred to his prescient observation that the African continent resembles a revolver, and Zaire is the trigger (Fanon, 1966 [2005]). His clairvoyant statement eerily prefigures what political commentators have, since the 1990s, characterized as the potential starting point of Africa's First World War (Williams, 2013). After the overthrow of Mobutu Sese Seko, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly known as Zaire) became the site where warring armies from more than four neighboring countries came to battle one another, presumably to defend the legitimate existence of a proxy group in the country. Zimbabwean and Angolan forces were aligned with the regime of Laurent Kabila, while Rwanda and Uganda—the original patrons of Laurent Kabila and his putsch-were now his sworn enemies. Fanon's second observation warned against the ramifications and implications of a Somali-Ethiopian war whose foundation was nationalistic (Fanon, 1969). This warning came with devastating consequences. The resulting political, social, and economic landscape of Somalia compels us to examine the contours of both the centripetal and centrifugal forces that still animate social upheavals. This requires a bold reexamination of analytic categories, and the ability to envision new ones to cope with the new reality. In this essay, I confine myself to the

new reality in the Horn of Africa. I will engage in a comparative analysis by telescoping a panoramic view of regional history. This new telescoping and reality must be understood, not from the vantage point of national disintegration by way of political conflict, but through the perspective that social transformation and migration work as the ultimate engine of social change (Richerson and Boyd, 2008).

Horn of Africa in Focus

On New Year's Eve 1991, the entire Somali state collapsed, and the people of Somalia began the last decade of the twentieth century mourning, instead of celebrating, the onset of a new millennium. To be sure, this kind of political conflict is not confined to Somalia; it remains a significant feature of the region. The Horn of Africa, which encompasses Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, South Sudan, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda, is one of, if not the most conflict-prone zones in the world. Several interlocking conflict clusters exist in the region. The first involves the long-standing civil strife in South Sudan, which extends into Uganda and Chad. The second centers around the complicated network of conflicts that link Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Kenya (Prendergast and Thomas-Jensen, 2007).

Each country is characterized by complicated and interlocked internal social and economic conflicts. Over the past three decades, every country in the region except Kenya has experienced a context-altering social conflict. Since the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie by the Derge in the early 1970s, Ethiopia has undergone radical social transformations. Once considered a cohesive Christian nation surrounded by an ocean of hostile Muslim populations, Ethiopia's manufactured and official narrative, by the 1970s, rapidly morphed into an internally conflicted nation with multiple identities, voices, and contested narratives. Eritrea's independence honeymoon is on the brink of becoming a nightmare with various ethnic and religious demarcation lines and conflicts. After a protracted civil war, South Sudan seceded from Sudan to become the newest member of the African Union. Within a year of declaring its independence, however,

South Sudan descended into political chaos. Somalia, the supposedly most homogeneous country on the continent, has shown that homogeneity, even if it were empirically true, is not an indication of political stability. Even Kenya, the region's most economically and politically stable country, is facing a legitimization crisis (Habermas, 1973), as are many other countries in the region.

What is more problematic is the apparent inability of much of the scholarship in the region, particularly Somali scholarship, to comprehend and contextualize the ever-expanding violence and the resultant dissolution of the nation-state. This is partly because the outlook of both Somali scholarship and Somali society has generally remained provincial, unable to theoretically and methodologically locate the Somali condition within the larger social, political, and demographic contexts of the region and the world. Somali scholarship suffers from what I consider to be an "ostrich syndrome." By ostrich syndrome, I mean a symptom that some people exhibit or manifest when they are confronted by confounding and conflicting social, political, or controversial issues in their lives. Instead of confronting the issues, such people would rather ignore them or, as ostriches do, bury their head in the sand, hoping that the threat will go away. This is why current Somali scholarship is obsessed with everyday dynamics--Al-Shabab versus the federal government, Clan X versus Clan Y, or which clan now controls which region—rather than discerning the gathering storm of impending social and demographic forces.

My purpose in this essay is to force Somali scholarship out of the ostrich syndrome and compel it to see the effect of regional social and demographic transformations on the social and geographic boundary of *Somaliness*. My argument is that, unless Somalis can subdue the current disintegration of Somalia, the ramparts of the nation as we know them will be severely tested—if not unhinged—by the demographic and economic forces of its neighbors. The purpose here is not to sound a false alarm, but to compel Somali scholars to reflect on relevant comparative and contrastive morphologies of migrations and counter-migrations. This increased awareness would help us to

reassess and gauge the ramifications of the ongoing immigrations and economic and geopolitical tendencies of Ethiopia and Kenya on the social and geographic boundaries of *Somaliness*.

The vexing nature of the political conflict and the legitimization crisis facing the region is most revealed in Somalia. Over the past twenty years, the Somali crisis has been articulated as an immediate conflict between differently named central governements with various groups claiming one form of camouflaged identity or another. This is not surprising because this conflict will mark its twenty-fourth anniversary next year and has taken on many different names. If history is a guide, this stubborn saga may prove to be nothing more than the newest episode of a political soap opera that cinematically kills certain characters and replaces them with new ones so that what actually changes is the naming of the oppositional binary characters rather than the conflict itself.

The Dynamics Within

On the eve of the Somali Civil War in 1991, the conflict, at least on the surface, was between United Somali Congress (USC) versus Siyaad Barre; within a year, it changed to Ali Mahdi versus Aideed. After twenty years and several character changes, we now have the National Federal Government versus Al-Shabab, Ahlu Sunna Wal-Jamaaca, and other self-proclaimed regional states. However, what remains unresolved is how to move the Somali nation away from divisive clans toward a more unified national identity articulated through one or another shared interest. Both Sheikh Aweys Mohamed and Sayyid Mohamed Abdulle Hassan, for example, attempted to transcend Somali clan divisiveness by introducing their own Islamic movements, which were infused with local, clan-based sensibilities. The most revealing example of the Somali attempts to transcend tribalism came during the Siyaad Barre regime. One of Barre's first actions was to "bury tribalism" by burning the tribe in the form of an effigy at pre-organized gatherings in every city and town in Somalia. These burnings dictated that from then onward, tribalism was dead, and any discussion of the idea would not be tolerated. As

with all dictators during the initial phase of solidifying their power, Barre camouflaged his activities under the banner of scientific socialism. He claimed that Somalia will be economically self-sufficient in a decade and that all Somalis will prosper regardless of their clan identity. However, within a few years, it was clear to the average Somali that Barre was engaging in tribalism by recruiting members of his clan and strategically placing them in important political, economic, and military positions.

The Somali inability to transcend tribalism is revealed in Amin Amir's 2006 cartoon, which shows a criminal being dragged by a member of the Islamic Counts Union (AminAmir.com). The Islamic Courts Union representative says, "Behaviors of the old days are no longer acceptable. I will now take you to the Islamic Courts Union's jail." The criminal responds, "Please take me to the court of my clan." A bystander says, "The criminal is correct. Take him to the court of his clan; they are the same anyway" (http://aminarts.com). I reference this cartoon not to suggest that the Islamic Courts Union was simply a proxy for clan motives, but to highlight the power of clan identities in informing religious, ideological, and nationalist identities in Somalia. More important, clan identities inform who is and who is not considered an enemy. If the roles of Ethiopia and Kenya over the past few years are examined, one will find that each country was considered as an enemy by one clan and a friend by another. This means that, in Somali clan politics, determinations about whether a country is an external enemy or a friend depends on the prevailing clan power politics and the balance of power between the clans. In the case of the controversy surrounding the supporters of the self-declared Jubbaland and supporters of the recently created state of Southwestern Somalia, Kenya is either a friend or a foe depending on where one's allegiances lie. Also, if one examines Somali Islamic movements, one will find that they emcompass diverse outlooks, objectives, and practices as informed by clan, ecological, and subsistence variables, making it difficult to concieve of a movement that can appeal to all Somalis. The reason why Somalis cannot transcend tribalism is that all national and local identities are

conflated with clan identities, making it difficult to tell one from the other.

The inability to start a movement that is able to transcend parochial, clan, or ethnic ontologies is not isolated to the Somali situation. Similar unappreciated and misundersood complexities are observable in countries throughout the region. This is because the conventional historiography that informed much of the scholarship on the Horn of Africa has been derived from the thesis that the main source of the region's political, social, and economic crises resulted from the colonial demarcation of state boundaries, creating anthropologically blurred social and physical boundaries that are buttressed by neo-colonialism. This kind of scholarship is, of course, not unique to the Horn of Africa, but is a general part of African scholarship.

Postcolonial Geopolitical Dynamics

Over the past fifty years, this scholarship has articulated various African problems as well as identities in terms of resistance to colonialism and structural adjustment problems among other areas. The usage of resistance to colonialism, structural adjustment issues, and postcolonial dictators as the only categories for analyzing the region's social and political realities has created two conceptual problems. First, the focus on resistance has created a condition in which external interventions and international geopolitical interests have been indiscriminately used as the main turning points that supposedly arrested the cultural and historical moments of the region's past. Second, resistance to colonial occupation and postcolonial geopolitical dynamics has created a situation in which each country's population has been portrayed as a homogeneous entity, and the only acknowledged differences and distinctions were because of the colonized and colonizer binary (Cooper, 1994). The point here is not to deny or question the negative effect of European economic and social structures on colonized societies, but to acknowledge that such an ontological position does not speak to contemporary social and political realities in the Horn of Africa. In

other words, the region's social and political contexts are fundamentally different from what they were two decades ago. This kind of historiography cannot account for the fact that the technological, demographic, and social contexts within which the regional social conflicts take place have become complicated. Recent advances in transportation and communication systems have compressed both time and space, creating a condition in which the flow of ideas, social action, and people has been transnationalized so that the traditional hegemony of the nation-state cannot be sustained empirically (Kearney 1995; Basch et al. 1992).

Demographically, the unending conflict in the region has led to an emigration of hundreds of thousands from the region, setting the foundation for a large, influential diaspora in Europe and North America. In addition, the conflict increased the level of migration within and between countries such that each country has a significant number of immigrants from other countries in the region. Underlying these local social difficulties, however, is demographic transformation, which is another transformative variable that has not been accounted for. I will spend the remainder of the paper elaborating on this issue.

The Dynamics of Social Transformation and Shifts in Identity

The idea of social transformation is intended to capture both the demographic and identity shifts that have occurred in the region over the past three decades and explain how these modifications may alter the political and power dynamics of the region. Over the past thirty years, the Horn of Africa has experienced one of its most significant demographic and population transformations in history. Prior to the 1990s, there was minimal migration between countries in the region. Since the Somali Civil War, hundreds of thousands of Somalis have fled to Ethiopia and settled in Addis Ababa and other regions of the country. A significant number of Ethiopians have immigrated to Somalia, particularly to the north and northeast, and Djibouti. When I visited Djibouti few years ago, I realized there was an increasing influx of Ethiopian immigrants in the country. My short visit to Addis

Ababa also confirmed the existence of a significant Somali immigrant population in the city. This is on top of the Somali Ethiopian population in what is officially known as Zone Five, or Kilika Shanaad, which houses about 10 percent of the total Ethiopian population. The number is significantly larger if the Somali immigrant population in Ethiopia is included. Both Djibouti and northern Somalia will likely experience a larger influx of Ethiopian immigrants. If this trend continues, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Somalia will have significant ethnic populations from each side of their national border. Similar trends will appear in Eritrea, Kenya, and Sudan as well. The region will be divided into immigrant sending or destination centers. This pattern may change the complex ethnic dynamics of each country so that the meaning of nationalism will be replaced with one based on economic opportunities.

This demographic transformation is further facilitated by increasing economic interdependency within the region. One clear example of this is the economic relationship between Ethiopia and Djibouti. In 2002, Ethiopia and Djibouti signed an electric power sharing agreement. This project costs more than US$80 million, including US$33 million from the African Development Bank and US$56 million from AfDB Bank Group. The agreement will likely increase the region's economic viability. More important, this project will further interdependence within the region, which will, along with population movement, change its social and political dynamics. The project will result in the economies of Ethiopia and Djibouti being so closely linked that any regional conflict will paralyze both countries and, by extension, Somalia.

One of the most revealing examples of this demographic transformation is found in the United States. Over the past two centuries, the United States has been transformed from a primarily white society with small black and native populations to one with large non-white populations. Current population projections indicate that by 2050, the non-white population will be nearly half of the total population. We already see the social and political consequences of this transformation in the election of President Obama, an idea that

political pundits would not have entertained just a decade ago. If the effect of demography is as important in the Horn of Africa as it is in the United States, the region will experience similar outcomes in the next fifty years or so. This shift will be even more significant given the increasing economic interdependency between the countries of the region, particularly Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya. Given the current relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Ethiopian economy will become increasingly dependent on Somalia and Djibouti because both countries are natural markets for Ethiopia. Because Ethiopia has the second largest population on the continent, Somalia and Djibouti will remain destinations for Ethiopian immigrants, which will, most likely, reconfigure the demographics of both countries.

The most significant demographic transformations will likely occur in Somalia and Djibouti. Since the Somali-speaking population is the smallest in the region, it will experience the most noticeable social and demographic shifts. Despite its size, the Somali-speaking population represents the most dispersed and most mobile community in the region. The size, mobility, and presence of the Somali population in Ethiopia and Kenya have internal and external implications for Somalia. If the quality of life in Djibouti and Somalia is better than in Ethiopia, which is very likely, Djibouti and Somalia will experience a significant influx of Ethiopians, which will, as I pointed out earlier, transform the ethnic boundaries of *Somaliness*. On the one hand, due to their large numbers in Kenya and Ethiopia, Somalis will influence the political dynamics of both countries. In other words, the Somali-speaking population will play a role in transforming the region's political and identity dynamics.

Conclusion

The Horn of Africa is probably in the midst of its second great migration, one that will parallel or eclipse the sixteenth-century migration that cemented the region's current settlement and identity patterns. Despite the lack of written record, this sixteenth century migration was spearheaded by the so-called great Somali migration waves that pushed the Oromo communities further upward into the

Ethiopian highlands. This migration, which was allegedly stopped by the British colonial administration in the early decades of the twentieth century, is credited with the current identity settlement patterns of the region. The migration of Somali people may have been caused by long droughts and clan warfare. I suspect similar conditions are at play in the region today, except that this time, the migration push may not just come from Somalia, but all sides. The most important component of this modern migration may be the emigration from Ethiopia to Somalia. A new factor in the current migration is the possibility of increased interdependency between Ethiopia, Somalia, and Kenya, which will simultaneously make economic opportunities, not ethnic identities, into the primary motive of settlement patterns and increase the interdependency of the countries' political and economic structures.

These processes will probably have the greatest effect on Somalia and Djibouti. Because Somalia and Djibouti have two of the smallest populations in the region, significant Ethiopian emigration will certainly increase the ethnic composition and diversity of both Somalia and Djibouti. My purpose is not to suggest that migration and demographic transformations are inherently a problem. To the contrary, it is, in fact, an engine for social change and economic development for the entire region. But my ultimate purpose is to gently force Somali scholarship out of the ostrich syndrome and to embrace the methodological imagination that will allow it to understand the Somali condition from a context increasingly characterized by continuous and dynamic social and demographic transformations.

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