Proceedings of the EASS/SSIA
International Congress of Somali Studies

Turku, Finland
August 6-9, 1998

VARIATIONS ON THE THEME OF SOMALINESS

edited by
Muddle Suzanne Lilius

Centre for Continuing Education
Åbo Akademi University

Martina I. Steiner

What is the Thing Called Somaliness?

Analyzing the term Somaliness, it can be conceptualized as a mental migration in time and space, according to its historical processes and the parallel social changes inside the boundaries of the (former) Somali Nation-State, and the various locations of the diaspora.

This conceptual base makes evident that the term itself and its content is not to be seen as a stable, finalized phenomenon, but as a quite flexible thing of which the meaning has been and will be interpreted both individually and collectively in multiple ways.

How is Somaliness going to be performed? This question is fundamental for both the societal and inter-ethnic network inside Somalia as well as for the establishment and the integration of Somali communities in the diaspora. I will touch on this question below, but first it seems useful to look at the various dimensions of the term itself.

Is the term Somaliness a noun or is it an adjective? How far does Somaliness undergo a process of awareness? Is it a 'cultural location' which can be chosen individually to a certain extent, but which to a large extent is attributed by the process of socialization? The individual's possibility to choose his/her life style and individual activities depends very much on the social position of every individual, based on both social and territorial provenance and sex. The adequate siting of the socio-political status and economic independence of an individual is the expansion of his/her autonomy and authority.

*

Both these aspects imply that the thing called Somaliness has both an 'emic' and an 'etic' perspective.

The 'emic' aspect is the self-identification, the belonging to, for example, a kinship group, the individual ascription to an (ideological) community, or, as is very important in the case of Somalia, being a Muslim. Historical reality and, as a more acute result for the every day life, politics are further aspects of the shaping of Somaliness as a common experience and its societal relevance.

The 'etic' perspective refers to the non-Somalis' view on Somaliness. This aspect has to be distinguished by hegemonic approach, using Gramsci's term. Cultural and/or economic hegemony, parity or subalternity have to be sited regarding inter-ethnic impacts. Power and interests define the mode of contacting between ethnic groups or individuals.

Both the 'emic' and the 'etic' approach means 'othering', which is the separation of Self and Other - not necessarily a denigrating process since the Other can be respected as such and not seen as culturally inferior or uncivilized. But the binary opposition of 'them' and 'us' reflects the necessity to have a 'psychological home' and a 'societal frame of reference' which seems to guarantee a network of solidarity. This view refers to Benedict Anderson's concept of the Imagined Community, which is connected to a system of self-reference based on identification. At this point of the discourse, we should consider what Stuart Hall says:

> 'Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term 'cultural identity' lays claim.' (Hall 1996:392)

I myself will try to give an 'etic' perspective on Somaliness, declaring my position of enunciation, which means the position from which I speak or write. My schooling as a white, Western anthropologist has been under the influence of a post-colonial philosophy, which make up my theoretical base for my experience in 'the field'. But, in the field I have been confronted with very different, and partially antagonistic approaches with the representation of Somaliness according to my own institutional position and my local vis-à-vis.

This will be an attempt to have a look at traditional forms of Somaliness, and the modification of Somaliness due to the war inside and outside Somalia. Here I have to point out that this is a narrative and representation based again on narratives and representation of Somalis.

But, who are the Somalis who talked about their own reality? Where are they, socially and geographically, situated, which is their societal position? I tried to listen to everyone who wanted to talk to me, remembering all the facts and information I had got before, observing and trying to understand the background and motivation for every single representation. Surely my cultural baggage influences my own representation.

After all those thoughts arises the basic question: what is the reality, and what is the truth? I would say, that there are many (virtual) realities, based on facts. Some people in (Somali) society are authorized to define the truth, and to influence the reality, more than others. That is a political reality based on socio-economic interests and opportunities.

Here arises the question whether Somaliness is a) a historical resume, b) a political product, or c) a societal 'code of conduct'?

*

First, it is appropriate to emphasize the 'historical resume' as a basic feature for Somaliness since we have both 'products of history' and the 'performer of history'. In this regard, I agree with Stuart Hall when he says:

> 'The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with the stable unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history.' (Hall 1996:394)

History is profoundly formative, challenging again both the emic and the etic aspect of its proceeding.

Somali history has very much been characterized by migration. That shaped the base for nomadism, which shaped the base for the clannic concept of society. Traditionally, that has been the very basic feature of Somaliness, since they are binary and oppositional to the concept of State building and Nationalism in a Western sense. Even if the early Sultanates of Hobyo and Mijertain in Northeastern Somalia constituted some kind of loose centralized government, the clannic appurtenance of Somali individuals and groups remained their 'address' to which they referred inside and outside the clan territory. Even if throughout history - consider for example the inter-clannic and inter-ethnic mobilization by Sayid Abdulle Hassan against the colonists, or the prohibition of clannism by Siyad Barre - the genealogical system of identification has been challenged, it remained a basic frame of reference for all the Somali people, since this societal pattern of identity has not been revoked and gives to every Somali his place, importance and consideration in society.

The etic result of history is colonialism, which ascribed to the Somalis certain adjectives

such as uncivilized and unable to establish an efficient economy. This had been the justification for imperialism: to civilize the Somali people. Western values and socio-political structures should have been imposed in Somalia but this didn't have the desired success. Their strong sense of Somaliness and their adequate ability to 'Other' the non-Muslims avoided the complete colonization of the Somali people, the abolishing of their Somaliness.

A further challenge of Somaliness had been the integration of Somalia into the Western World Market, as the traditional economic autarchy of the 'Closed Market' of the Benadir, described by Romolo Onor around 1918, had been undermined. This socio-economic process, which started with Western colonization by establishing Somali middlemen for the colonial government and its (economic) interests, started to create gaps amongst Somali clan-groups. By this socially disintegrating process, Somaliness became a more exclusive approach for some Somalis than for others.

Here, Somaliness is referred to as a political product. The democratic regime after independence in 1960 allowed the Somali people to develop Somaliness on a broad basis. With the beginning of the regime of Siyad Barre, Somaliness had been defined in forms of centralized Nationalism. It means that the official representation of Somaliness had been requested and superimposed by the Somali regime. The introduction of media in Somalia had been so to this intent. This signified that the hegemonic system of the regime had to be accepted as part of Somaliness.

Thereby Somaliness had been defined as the public code of conduct which had been recommended by the regime and the administrative apparatus. An official version of Somaliness had apparently been shared by the Somali people involved in public life. There had been created a gap between Somaliness in private and in public life, insofar as the authentically felt Somaliness connected to the clannic life and the knowledge about the use and customs had been politically prohibited. This provoked strong tensions, since genealogy avoids individual anonymity within Somali society. Every individual had been educated and socialized according to the very specific cultural knowledge of Somali society, which had been based traditionally - before the beginning of the colonial era - according to strategies of survival on an economy of subsistence.

Colonization and the subsequent import of Western ideas and alliances in Somalia produced heterogenized forms of Somaliness, which in the end became antagonistic enough to be the ideological base for war.

*

Resuming the three perspectives, I would say that they cannot be separated, they are organically connected. It is evident that Somaliness as a system of identification has had and still has positive as well as negative effects. The recent war, unfortunately, gave it the connotation of violence.

According to historical as well as anthropological knowledge, both in general and specifically in Somalia, the situation shows that a dramatic event like a war motivates revolutionary changes within inter-personal, inter-familial, inter- and intra-clannic and, last but not least, inter-ethnic relations.

One important reason for this socio-political development is the growing antagonism between collectivity and individualism in Somali society. In emphasizing 'Somaliness', concepts like 'tradition' and 'culture' come to my mind. In the view of the instability of the Somali social structure, tradition is a relative measure, as it is quite adaptable according to the social situation, political needs or economic constraints. Tradition became the memory of past ritualized imageries which lost their substance by the turmoil of the war.

Furthermore, is tradition thought of as the basic ingredient of culture? Is culture then mainly a rhetorical technique of emargination, a category which emphasizes hegemony due to

differences, forming the basis of racism, or a discovery of the social sciences which produces a lot of antagonism in everyday life? Or is it instead a source of collective identity which is important for the social integration of individuals and collectives? Is culture the issue which connects discourses, makes jokes funny and gives people the possibility to be subversive?

To resume, we can affirm again that the potentiality of Somaliness diverges in both directions, both in consolidating hegemonies and in establishing (new) patterns of solidarity. It is a matter of both individual and collective interpretation. This antagonism is performed in Somalia by both armed conflicts and in the proceedings of the peace process.

The Somali diaspora reflects this ambiguity as

> 'such collective histories come to challenge one another, or to engage in struggles over history and truth, can become a particularly challenging question among refugees and other displaced people. It is precisely the intersitital position of refugees in the system of nation-states that makes their lives uniquely clarifying and enabling for the anthropological rethinking of nationess, of statelessness, and the interconnections between historical memory and national consciousness (...) Exploring questions of identity and history among people who by virtue of their 'refugeeness' occupy a problematic, liminal position in the national order of things...' (Malkki 1995:1)

Exploring Somaliness in the diaspora we have to look at it, abstracting it from the national frame, as a new form of cohabitance, connected to the specific environment of the host country.

*

Is Somali culture insofar one of the basic features of Somaliness? If we agree on this hypothesis, specific knowledge of values and their performance have to be recognized. Now is the right historical moment to delay the hegemonies amongst sexes, clans and ethnic groups in order to establish an adapted democracy in Somalia.

Siting Somaliness as a frame for (self-)identification, the multiple identities of each individual should be emphasized as the kaleidoscopic change of situations and the so called 'intersexion' affects us personally and is manifested by the multiplicity of attributes of an individual. That means that each individual defines him/herself through 'modifier multiple' axes such as: history, ethnicity, racism, gender, class, clan, nation, region, religion, age, children, language, personal abilities views, sentiments, and so forth. Within one individual, dominance and subversion can be unified at the same time, according to the dynamics of both the relationships between the above mentioned factors and the social process. This might be a tool for discovering destructive hegemonic forms within Somali society.

Bibliography

Hall, Stuart (1996): 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora.' In Padmini, Mongia (ed): *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*. New York: St. Martin's Press

Malkki, Liisa H. (1995): *Purity and Exile. Violence, Memory and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*. Chicago: Chicago University Press