



PROJECT MUSE®

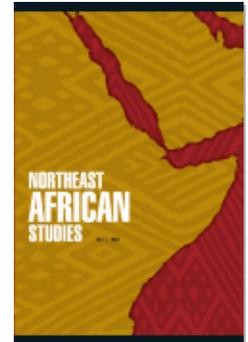
I. M. Lewis and Somali Clanship: A Critique

Lidwien Kapteijns

Northeast African Studies, Volume 11, Number 1, 2004-2010 (New Series), pp. 1-23 (Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press

DOI: *10.1353/nas.2004.0000*



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nas/summary/v011/11.1.kapteijns.html>

I. M. Lewis and Somali Clanship: A Critique

LIDWIEN KAPTEIJNS, *Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA*

ABSTRACT

In this article, Kapteijns offers a critique of the clanship paradigm of I. M. Lewis, a leading scholar in the field of Somali studies from the early 1960s until today. Kapteijns situates Lewis's paradigm on Somali clanship at a particular historical moment, namely, at the end of the colonial period, and proposes that we see it as representative of a "colonial synthesis" or "colonial consensus" that was worked out between the colonial state (especially the British colonial state) and its Somali subjects over a period of about 80 years. She argues that, rather than seeing the episodes of "clan cleansing" and other forms of clan-based communal violence that marked the Somali civil war (1978 to the present) as evidence that the Lewisian paradigm of clan is correct, we should ask how this way of thinking, which has its roots in colonial state formation, has—in limited, namely, discursive ways—contributed to the Somali self-views that have made such large-scale violence in the name of clan possible. This article had been accepted for publication by the editors of Lewis's festschrift, but when Lewis expressed objections to its inclusion, the editors pressured the author to withdraw it.¹ However, the major objective of this article is not to question Lewis's pivotal significance and enormous accomplishments in Somali studies, but

to put his work into historical perspective and to bring to bear on it new insights from other areas of study.

Introduction

When large-scale violence occurs in Africa, initial analyses rarely go beyond characterizations of it (and, by implication, characterizations of the nature of the groups involved) as “ethnic” or “tribal.” Over time, more nuanced, historically based, and carefully contextualized analyses emerge. These often try to understand the complexities of, and changes in the nature of, the groups and group identities in whose name violence has been committed and suffered. Thus, in the scholarship about Rwanda, for example, conceptualizations of the labels/identity constructs of “Hutu” and “Tutsi” have become quite sophisticated, even as the classification of the violence as genocide has (justifiably) remained uncontested (Eltringham 2004; Newbury 1998). In the case of Darfur, more carefully historicized and contextualized understandings of the labels “Arab” and “Black” or “African” are emerging as we speak, and here the categorization of the violence as genocide is hotly contested and the interests of advocates of this naming are critically examined (Willemse 2005 and 2009; Mamdani 2009). However, in the case of Somalia, there has been little in-depth scholarly analysis of the violence that accompanied state collapse; as a result, the nature of the groups involved as perpetrators or victims—in this context referred to as “clans”—is too often taken at face value.

When it comes to thinking about “clan,” the field of Somali studies has been characterized by two paradigms, both of which will be discussed below. The first paradigm emphasizes clanship and “clan” (that is to say, the notion of agnation or patrilineal descent that constructs the groups called lineage, clan, and clan family) as the basic social institution and the major and enduring principle of the sociopolitical organization of Somali society. From its perspective, the principle of “clan” structures the overall system, in whose functioning it has always been and remains the major determinant. For example, according to this paradigm, Somalis may today have replaced their spears with bazookas and rocket-propelled grenades, but the basic structure of their sociopolitical system and the

function of clan in it have remained the same. I. M. Lewis developed this theoretical model in the late 1950s, as he updated the structural-functional approaches to social anthropology of Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski by letting go of static structuralism but holding on to a modified notion of “function” (Lewis 1968, xxiv, and 1999a, 23).² As this modified structural-functional approach appears to have mostly survived in Somali studies, where I. M. Lewis half a century later is still defending it, I will call it the Lewisian paradigm.

The second paradigm holds that the Lewisian perspective overemphasises the importance of “clan” and that this overemphasis emerged in a very specific historical context, namely, that of the late-colonial consensus between British rulers and Somali subjects recorded by Lewis during his 1955–57 fieldwork. According to this second theoretical model, clanship is therefore not a basic and stable organizational and behavioral principle of Somali society but a basic principle of a particular and extremely influential *way of thinking about* Somali society, a way of thinking—a discourse if you will—with a very particular history and a nefarious influence in the present. As this paradigm sets out to “deconstruct” clanship as a natural, self-evident category, I will call it “deconstructive” and historical, terms to be further discussed below.³ I will briefly lay out three arguments that may help to disprove and displace the Lewisian paradigm: first, that clanship was never the only important organizational principle of Somali social organisation in the past; second, that clanship is not static, given, or self-evident but acquires its meaning as it “is performed” in specific contexts; and third, that the Lewisian paradigm with its overemphasis on clanship not only has a history of which it is unaware but, because of that history, has also *contributed to* the clan discourse that continues to dominate thinking about Somalia today. This essay will review each argument in turn and then draw some provocative conclusions.

First, scholars who object to the Lewisian overemphasis on clan can point to extensive scholarship—including Lewis’s own—showing that there existed, historically, important principles of Somali sociopolitical organization and collective identity other than clan. For example, in the precolonial era, Somalis lived in polities and communities of various kinds, not just in ones structured by kinship organization or clan. In the Islamic city-states in the north and south, and on the coast as well as inland, belonging was structured in terms of citizenship, differentiated by gender,

class, and descent, and not just in terms of clanship.⁴ Regional political alliances across ecological niches, as in the case of the Ajuuraan polity studied by Cassanelli (1982), were also significant. Other Somalis, at least in the nineteenth century, lived in religious agricultural communities called *jaamaacad*, where clan identity was subordinated to other aspects of belonging, including religious identity and residence. Even within pastoral nomadic groups, the principles of social solidarity were more complex than those of agnation—as a closer analysis of Lewis’s work (see below) will show—and perhaps even before but certainly during the colonial period, middle- or under-class status, both strongly gendered, became important elements of social stratification and sociopolitical organization that intersected with and modified clan identities. In the mixed agriculture communities between the rivers, too, clanship was just one element of collective identity and social organization. Here, as elsewhere, real or alleged slave descent and so-called lower caste status also differentiated Somalis internally. In other words, a substantial body of scholarship has documented that Somali society and Somali sociopolitical organization in the past cannot be reduced to either narrow or broad constructions of clanship (Cassanelli 1982; Gesheker 1985; Kapteijns and Spaulding 1989; Besteman 1999; Helander 1999; Luling 2002; Vianello and Kassim 2006).⁵

Second, scholarship arguing that there is more to clanship than meets the Lewisian eye is still in its infancy. Having rejected clan and clanship as unchanging principles of social behavior and organization, the scholars of the second paradigm must show that, even if the labels and names of Somali clans (lineages, clan sections, and clan families) have remained the same,⁶ their characteristics, functions, meanings, and so forth have changed and do change in accordance with changing contexts. If they insist that identities (including clan identities) take shape as they are performed, that is to say, as people enact and assert them in concrete circumstances and drawing on complex historical understandings, then they must document the contexts in which clanship gains specific meanings and show what is “rolled into” clan at any specific moment. Here the existing scholarship has so far fallen short and has only gestured at the contexts in which the construct of clan has combined with, or indeed absorbed and trumped, other sociopolitical categories. Between

the unwarranted Lewisian assumption that clan is self-explanatory and the failure to fully engage it as a real force in the scholarship of the deconstructive approach, clan, that construct of “groupness” in whose name so much of the violence of the Somali civil war was perpetrated and suffered, has therefore remained largely unexamined. In order to illustrate a paradigm that both deconstructs *and* contextualizes—an approach that I simply call historical—I will analyze a particular episode of clan violence in the last part of this essay. However, I will first develop in some detail the third argument.

The third argument to be put forward against the Lewisian paradigm questions how the emphasis on a very narrow construction of clanship gained such epistemological prominence, and with what consequences for the current discourse of clan in Somalia. Several scholars have made initial contributions to this area of study (Kapteijns 1999, 151–57; Little 1996; A. Samatar 1992). Kapteijns has situated the intellectual roots of the Lewisian clan paradigm squarely in the colonial context and has asserted that this colonial clan discourse is one root of the clan thinking that has proved so disastrous in the ongoing Somali civil war. As such, critiquing the basic assumptions of the Lewisian paradigm is not just an idle intellectual pastime but an attempt to lay bare the complex historical roots and what Foucault would call the “genealogy” of current clan discourse (Hunt and Wickham 1998, 119).⁷ In laying out this third argument, I will critique Lewis’s views of clan and assess their impact by first analyzing his foundational ethnography entitled *A Pastoral Democracy: A Study of Pastoralism and Politics among the Northern Somali of the Horn of Africa* (1999b) and then looking at his recently updated essay entitled *Understanding Somalia and Somaliland: Culture, History, Society* (2008). The former represents Lewis’s earliest and most elaborate book-length study of the function of clan in Somali politics, while the latter is a shorter, more general work, which illustrates, it will be argued here, the limits of the explanatory power of Lewis’s clan paradigm for understanding and explaining “clan violence” in the Somali civil war. If this critique attacks the basic assumptions of Lewis’s clan paradigm, it does so in order to outline an alternative approach and research agenda—one in which neither the Somali past nor the Somali future need to be imagined in terms of clan alone.

Lewis's Clan Paradigm and the Late-Colonial Consensus

A Pastoral Democracy, first published in 1961 and reissued twice, in 1982 and 1999, is the standard, “classic” ethnography of the Somali people.⁸ Lewis conducted the research for this book in the British Somaliland Protectorate in 1955–57, during the final years of colonial rule.⁹ As a formal guest of the colonial administration, supported by a colonial development grant, he had full access to the knowledge that British colonial officials, in close interaction with their Somali subjects (friends and foes), had accumulated in their files and memories over a period of more than 70 years. Many of these officials had spent their whole careers in the British Somaliland Protectorate and had specialized in ruling the Somalis indirectly, that is to say, through what they came to consider acceptable Somali custom and customary authorities. During this period, they had developed an elaborate network—solidified in the 21 years of warfare against Sayid Maxamed Cabdille Xassan (1899–1921)—of Somali assistants, interpreters, personal servants, informers, policemen, scouts, and government “headmen,” who all helped shape a body of commonly accepted knowledge about what “custom” and “tradition” (and thus the distinctive Somali institutions on which colonial rule should be based) really were. As I will explain below, I call this the late-colonial consensus. In this context, Lewis’s ethnographic study came to present not only 20 months of fieldwork by a gifted and insightful ethnographer but also the first and the definitive summing up of the accumulated colonial knowledge. This is part of the enduring value and strength of Lewis’s study.

It is not uncommon that the strength of studies we come to regard as classics, as epitomizing a whole field of study at a specific moment in time, is also their major weakness. I argue that this is also the case for Lewis’s *Pastoral Democracy* and the way it is embedded in the colonial paradigm. Indeed, Lewis is so completely inside the colonial project that he is blind to it in two important ways. First, though he conducted his research in the dying days of colonial rule in Somaliland, Lewis categorically excludes from his analysis the impact of colonial rule on the Somali pastoralists he studied. The book contains so few references to “the Government” that one might believe that Somali pastoralists had not been touched by colonial domination at all. Yet the pastoralists’ strategies for access to grazing and water, the structure of their grazing encampments,

the quality of the range, and their relations with each other, including the “pastoral politics” of the book’s title—all part of the subject matter of the book—were shaped and transformed by the processes that colonial rule brought about or cut short. I will give just three examples. To begin with, the signing away of vast areas of Somali-inhabited land by the British colonial rulers cut off large numbers of Somali pastoralists from each other and from their accustomed and indispensable grazing lands. Second, the steep increase in livestock exports, among many other things, led to a grave deterioration of the range; and, finally, the bitter war against Sayid Maxamed led to such devastating civil strife and famine that tens of thousands of Somalis were killed and displaced. Lewis, instead, presents the mechanisms of Somali pastoral politics and social organization in isolation from this historical context and abstracts them from processes of historical causation and agency such as those presented above.

A second aspect of the embeddedness of Lewis’s work in the colonial paradigm and project is that he has been blind to (and has refused to engage) the epistemological genesis of his own understanding of the Somalis and its relationship to the accumulated colonial knowledge on which it drew so heavily and which it came to represent. The most elaborate recent analysis of how colonial indirect rule constructed and “produced” its subjects is the analysis by Mahmood Mamdani. In his *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Mamdani has shown how colonial rule, often by force, transformed constructs of groupness such as “tribe” (and, in the Somali context, clan and its subdivisions),¹⁰ because the only legal identity the “natives” were allowed, and the only way in which the state was willing to deal with them, was as a *group*. The group that was thus legally produced was constituted by custom (itself determined by the state in interaction with its subjects), applied by old or new customary authorities such as headmen or chiefs (Mamdani 1996). The Somali context fits Mamdani’s model well, as here too the colonial legal construction and transformation of clan and custom created a space of highly arbitrary and undemocratic authority that was actively shaped and fought over by entrepreneurial Somalis. For example, Somalis quickly caught on to how customs recognized by the British gained the force of law, and they flocked to the courts of the colonial district commissioners to shape British interpretations of their custom to their own benefit (Rayne 1921).¹¹ Thus, in colonial Somaliland,

the *function* of clan gained a crucial new dimension as it became the instrument of a governmental technology of power by which the rulers coerced and co-opted—in classic divide-and-rule fashion—the ruled, and by which the ruled competed with each other to pry benefits (or just gain protection) from the penurious state. In this, the long-established colonial institution of collective punishment, which survived into and beyond the Barre regime, played an important role. According to such a reading, the obsessive focus on clan at the expense of other solidarities and sociopolitical arrangements and institutions—worked out in the form of a colonial consensus between and among rulers and subjects—is a profoundly colonial one and cannot be abstracted from the context of colonial rule (Kapteijns 1999, 151–57).

Lewis's work, according to this reading, fits and sums up this late-colonial consensus about what Somalis and their distinctive sociopolitical institutions were all about. This consensus reflected the dominant male ideology of those British *and* Somali men who struggled to define the Somali tradition in their own political contexts and for their own purposes, and came to include those who, like Lewis, arrived at the end of the colonial era to witness, interpret, and record it.¹² Its ideological thrust, it is argued here, included three closely related biases. First, it emphasized the significance of men at the expense of women; second, it emphasized politics at the expense of other dimensions of Somali society (such as work or production); and, third, it presented clanship (in its colonial version reduced to agnation or patrilineality) at the expense of other principles of sociopolitical organization.

Let us briefly examine Lewis's construction of clan, for it is here that the reductive¹³ impulses of his approach and its deep affinity with the colonial paradigm are most obvious. When Lewis entered the field of anthropology, rigid structural-functionalism and mechanical applications of the segmentary lineage model had begun to be questioned, and more flexible, less static approaches to the study of non-state societies were emerging (Lewis 1968).¹⁴ Lewis contributed to the reformulation of this paradigm by holding fast to aspects of structural-functionalist interpretation while trying to remedy some of its mechanical rigidity. Thus he proposed that Somali sociopolitical behavior and organization were based on *two* major principles, not just clanship (especially agnation, on whose basis a Somali individual inherits his/her clan membership through

the male and not the female line) but also, and this was his innovation, something called “contract.” Contract (his interpretation of the Somali concept of *xeer*)—that is to say, egalitarian agreements or treaties that bind those who enter upon them to specific rights and duties—features in Lewis’s analysis as a fundamental element of political organization. In *A Pastoral Democracy*, Lewis even concedes that “it is possible to have treaty obligations and political solidarity without agnation” (1999b, 193) and points out that “the political and jural status of individuals, defined at birth by their membership of determinate lineages, may be altered by contracts of their own making” (*ibid.*, 299). Moreover, throughout the book, he gives specific examples of groups and individuals making political agreements in the absence of agnatic relations, for “contract can unite groups between whom no agnatic relationship subsists” (*ibid.*, 186–92).

However, even as he argues these points, Lewis subsequently (or even simultaneously) tries to make contract disappear within patrilineal kinship and clanship and subordinates the former to the latter. Thus he claims that, while Somalis regard the principles of clanship and contract as complementary, “agnation is viewed as the primary, all pervasive, force ordering social relations” (Lewis 1999b, 193). Other sources of political conduct such as contract, marriage, religious identity, neighborliness, and friendship have an active presence in Lewis’s ethnographic observation. However, perhaps uncritically accepting the interpretations of his male Somali informants,¹⁵ Lewis ultimately dismisses these other sources and simply reasserts the overwhelming significance of agnation. Other sources of political conduct “may have usurped some of the functions of agnation,” but “blood-group solidarity, which is the most decisive criterion of political allegiance remains that of the pastoral morality founded on agnation” (*ibid.*, 126).

The same overemphasis on patrilineal kinship and clan as principles of political organization is evident from Lewis’s analysis of marriage. Similarly, Lewis minimized the political significance of marriage in comparison with agnation. His conclusion that “the affinal link . . . does not give rise to formal political relations” and “is not of itself a direct political alliance” (1999b, 140) underplayed marriage as a fundamental institution in the construction of sociopolitical relationships. Clanship may indeed constitute the terms in which Somali men have articulated formal political rationales, but even in Lewis’s own ethnographic observations we see

the concrete, lived, sociopolitical consequences of affinal ties. Lewis's small ethnographic survey of the composition of some nomadic domestic hamlets in the northeast showed that affinal connections shaped patterns of coresidence. He emphasized the agnatic core of hamlets but glossed over the astounding fact that one would find, if one were willing to count women, as many as four clans represented in hamlets containing as few as four or six collapsible houses (*ibid.*, 63–72). Moreover, because of the strong rules of exogamy Somalis used to observe, married *women* constituted the dense web of crisscrossing sociopolitical connections between the clans emphasized by the colonial consensus. Without the relationships men constructed through women and the institution of marriage, no group calling itself Somali would have existed.

For Lewis, such relationships are not political: “Since the concern of this book is with politics, and not with marriage and kinship, we do not need to pay much attention to the affinal relations created by marriage” (1999b, 137). By excluding from its analysis a priori the sociopolitical roles of women, the ideological thrust of this interpretation (its blindness to anything but clanship) represents a colonial distortion of the broader range of ways in which precolonial Somalis constructed their political and moral obligations to each other. While it is a tribute to the young Lewis's skills as an ethnographer that the tensions between his detailed ethnographic observations of the realities on the ground and his ideological overemphasis on clanship are clearly visible in his study, this does not make the ahistorical and reductive aspects of his views of Somalis and Somali politics, as he articulated them so many decades ago, any less striking.

Toward a New History of Clanship

The question that arises, then, is how the other paradigm—which can be called a purposefully historical one—would propose to approach clan. How would we go about reconstructing the complex historical roots and contemporary contexts in which clan and clanship take on specific meanings and become infused with other aspects of identity and experience that enhance their power? Here I can only give, in outline, an example of what such a historical analysis might look like.

I will take the example of the clan violence unleashed in Mogadishu from December 1990 to January 1991. In that period, clan-based militias overran the city and massacred unsuspecting civilians constructed by them as members of enemy clans in need of extermination and expulsion. I could have chosen, with equally good reason, the violence committed in the same place and period by Maxamed Siyaad Barre's Red Berets, who by this time are said to have "belonged" almost exclusively to a particular clan and to have singled out for various kinds of lethal violence, simply on the basis of their clan, individuals suspected of association with the armed fronts opposing the regime.¹⁶ In the former case, both the rank-and-file men who perpetrated most of the actual violence and the military and political leaders who recruited and incited them belonged to a particular clan family, and, it was reported, acted out of clan-based resentments and ambitions. They targeted for looting, rape, execution, and expulsion all those civilians whose only offense was their group identity—that they "belonged" to the clans that made up the vast clan family of the dictator.

Presenting the violence committed by these militias as clan violence, therefore, undoubtedly captures one of its dimensions, namely, the motivations and rationales of many of its perpetrators. Moreover, since this interpretation of clan coincides with the way many Somalis interpret and articulate what happened, it is an indispensable aspect of (and, to the historian, a primary source for) any scholarly analysis of this violence. However, a deeper analysis and fuller contextualization of the meaning of clan in the context of this violence presents three further analytical tasks—a deconstructive task and two tasks of contextualization. The first step is to scrutinize the meaning of "clan" in the term "clan violence"; for us, rejecting this meaning as obvious and probing it more deeply for its inconsistencies is a deconstructive or resistant approach to that meaning (Meyer 1996, 77, Willemse 2007, 307). The second step focuses on synchronic contextualization and consists of trying to understand the precise contemporary context in which this clan violence took place. What exactly were the circumstances in which clan became such a violent aspect of identity and sociopolitical action? The third dimension of the analysis focuses on diachronic contextualization and consists of trying to understand the many strands and the complex tapestry of history that made it possible for clan to become such a violent force. Without

being able to provide an exhaustive analysis in this context, I will briefly elaborate on each of these steps.

To begin with, even a superficial examination reveals that clan is both too broad and too narrow a concept to justify an interpretation of this episode of violence as just “clan violence.” It is much too broad, because the militias and out-of-control bands of violent men *did not* constitute or represent the whole clan or clan family to which they belonged. Many of those who happened to be members of these clans or this clan family did not want anything to do with this violence, rejected it, tried to stop it, and saved many of those targeted by it. The same is true for the leaders of the (clan-based) armed opposition front that had recruited the fighters, the United Somali Congress or USC. Many of these leaders did not want this violence and tried to prevent and end it (even though, in the aftermath, none of them have publicly and explicitly condemned any specific acts and episodes of the violence committed in this period). One must therefore conclude that the clan label is, at the very least, a very imprecise one.

If clan is on the one hand too broad a concept, it is at the same time also much too narrow a concept to describe or explain the violence. The identity and motivation of the perpetrators of the violence went beyond those of clan. These perpetrators were largely men, frequently impoverished younger men from the countryside or the slums of the ever-growing capital city. These men had a huge grudge against more comfortably off city people, the real or presumed beneficiaries of Barre’s military regime, and appear often to have just wanted to wreck or loot (and sell) private and public urban property. The clan label, therefore, falls short and conceals the class and rural-urban antagonisms that played a role in the dynamics of violence at that moment, as well as particular enactments of masculinity that informed the violence. It also obscures the roles other armed fronts—especially the Somali National Movement (SNM) and the Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM), which in October 1990 adopted a joint strategy with the USC—had in bringing the war into Mogadishu (Issa-Salwe 1996, 104).

However, deconstructing the concept of clan is not enough, for we must also explain how clan could become such a powerful force. (This, I have argued above, is an area of inquiry that has so far been neglected.)¹⁷ The next steps in the analysis, therefore, go beyond deconstruction to a

painstaking contextualization of the meaning of clanship, and thus focus on both the synchronic and diachronic contexts of this episode of clan violence. As part of the synchronic contextualization, we ask under exactly what contemporary circumstances the notion of clan in this episode of clan violence emerged. For example—a full analysis lies beyond the scope of this essay—it is important to establish that the men who committed most of the violence had been indoctrinated by their leaders and had been encouraged to understand their economic and political situation in terms of clan. They had been armed and militarily prepared to kill in the name of clan. They had been promised the wealth of particular categories of city people as their compensation and just reward. When they arrived in Mogadishu, they found that they could get away with their crimes, and they even received validation and material rewards from some of their leaders. In addition, they found that the more they killed in the name of clan, the more the hostile clan identities they performed became indisputably and irreversibly “real.”⁸

However, as significant as the *synchronic* context of clan in this episode of clan violence is, its *diachronic* context must also be explored. Here the difference from the Lewisian paradigm is even starker. As is evident from his writings about social anthropology as an academic discipline, Lewis sees value in historical analysis. Even though structural-functionalism came into being as an alternative to the now fully discredited historical (diffusionist or evolutionary) approaches that preceded it, Lewis (1985, 9–20) has argued that even the most rigid and mechanical structural-functionalists—the intellectual ancestors he cherishes and critiques—had a sense of the importance of history. However, their and his sense of history is very different from the one meant here. Lewis is not interested in how clanship is constituted in history as individuals and groups—in context—enact and perform it. Rather, even as he tries to free himself from the structural-functionalist mindset, he assumes and remains preoccupied with the continuity of the deep and enduring aspects of social institutions and mechanisms. For him, time—either the past or the future—presents a kind of laboratory in which the anthropologist can determine the validity of his insights into such continuities: “As Evans-Pritchard rightly insists,” he notes approvingly, “. . . history affords the social anthropologist a much neglected laboratory for testing the validity of structural assumptions and social mechanisms” (Lewis 1968, xx) and

allows him “to sift out superficial relationships and correlations from deep attachments between institutional complexes persisting over time” (ibid., xxi). In his most elaborate analysis of the value of history to anthropology, Lewis (1985, 9) concludes: “Thus, the time dimension—both in retrospect and prospect—offers us a fuller and more rounded picture of the institutions and beliefs we study, enabling us to distinguish between the ephemeral and enduring, and so helps us to reach a more definitive assessment of the significance of the phenomena confronting us.”

Whatever the merits or drawbacks of such an approach in general, with regard to the study of Somalia, it has led Lewis to defend the initial overemphasis on clan with even more vigor. Having isolated clanship as a dominant institution—a dominant trait—of Somali society in the late 1950s, Lewis and other supporters of his paradigm have now traced it forward into the present. Finding it more significant (and destructive) than ever, they regard this as confirmation that Lewis’s original interpretation was correct. The paradigm advocated here approaches history very differently. It assumes that a social institution or collective identity such as clan is not a history-proof container that is tossed on the tides of change or hurtles into the future unaffected by them, but that it derives its ever-changing meanings from the historical context in which people, through their purposeful or nonpurposeful actions and understandings, give it meaning.¹⁹ Even where names and labels stay the same, this paradigm holds, the meanings and functions of clan have not remained the same and can be understood and explained only in their specific contexts.

What would a diachronic contextualization of the events that occurred in Mogadishu in late 1990 and early 1991 look like? Like (but also unlike) any other moment in history, this particular moment of “clan cleansing” constituted a junction of many different strands of history that came together to shape the meaning and function of clan and clan identity in those days, weeks, and months of violence. Here I will only *illustrate* this analytical step and outline some of the most prominent of these processes, most of which, I argue, remain understudied.

A crucial historical process that shaped this violence is that of the “tribalization” or “clannicization” of state institutions under Barre’s military regime, a complex set of processes that have been analyzed by Compagnon (1995 and 1998) and Laitin and Samatar (1987, 90–91,

156–57), and of which the creation of clan-based militias as instruments of the state to contain or attack other clans was an ominous example (Bradbury 2008, 55). Closely related to this is the powerful strand of collective clan punishment that was a central feature of the regime’s violent repression of opposition right from the start (Samatar 1991), as well as the increasing *magnitude* of the violence the state unleashed against its citizens—on a scale unimaginable before the destruction of the northwest in April/May 1988 (Gardner and El Bushra 2004). A narrower but significant strand of this complex history consists of the personal rivalries and political ambitions of the politicians and other men who formed Maxamed Siyaad Barre’s peer group and who became the leading warlords of the Somali civil war—men who appear to have wanted to take Barre’s place more than to properly reconstitute the state.²⁰

The construction and elaboration over time of quasi-historical, “mythical” hate-narratives form another important thread of history that shaped the meaning clan took on during this and other episodes of clan violence of the civil war. In another context, Ben Lieberman (2006, 300) has shown how the everyday bonds between ordinary people who ate, played, worked, and went to school together were canceled out by narratives of (*mutatis mutandis*) clan hatred that turned true or imagined clan victimization and discrimination of the past into charters for violence in the present. Such mythical clan hate-narratives seemingly explained why people of certain clans deserved to die and provided rationales for turning what in other contexts would clearly be crimes against humanity and grave sins in front of God into the acceptable, even meritorious acts of settling scores and forwarding the in-group’s interests. How widespread and multifaceted this kind of political spin was, and how it shaped and was shaped by violence, is illustrated, after the fact, by the brilliant satirical poetry of Mohamud Siad Togane.²¹

A final strand of the history of ideas that has made clan what it became in 1990–91 and has become today is the scholarly discourse about clan as it has developed from the colonial period onward. This aspect of the diachronic context brings us back to I. M. Lewis and his work on the Somali civil war.

The Colonial Clan Paradigm and Clan Violence in the Somali Civil War

One might forgive a beloved classic such as *A Pastoral Democracy* its blindness to its own epistemological genesis. However, Lewis has gone on to repeat and restate his views of Somali clans in ever more triumphalist terms. To his mind, Somalia's recent history of clan violence has borne out the accuracy of his initial views and has vindicated their validity vis-à-vis his critics (Lewis 1999b, xii). This brings us back to the subject of large-scale violence with which this essay began.

In the (largely anthropological) scholarship on genocide and large-scale communal violence on which I draw here—for example, the work by Bowen, Bringa, Donham, Eltringham, Feldman, and Hinton—the question of how such violence should be studied and what kind of representational and analytical strategies it requires has given rise to much debate. One crucial insight emerging from this is that a critical interrogation of the construction of the groupness that informs large-scale communal violence and the ways in which violence and group identity shape each other is indispensable. A failure to engage in such a deconstruction, and in a full contextualization of the ways in which the groupness in whose name such violence was committed came to be constituted as such, often means—these scholars argue—an uncritical acceptance of the categories that *result from* the particular violence, and thus a simplification and distortion of the processes by which the groupness involved became so lethal. In the absence of such a critical approach, to quote Donham, “the ‘projected’ past marches toward the present as what are arguably outcomes are understood as pre-existing causes” (Donham 2006, 28). The danger here is twofold. The first is that a scholar ends up siding with those who masterminded or committed the violence by accepting the identity constructs the latter intended to impose (and often succeeded in imposing) by force. The second is, as Donham argues so poignantly, that “[t]his tendency to read the present (after violence) into the past necessarily overemphasises and overplays the role of hatred of the other as an explanation of violence. Nothing ‘primordializes’ identity more efficiently than the personal experience of violence, especially of violence that appears to be directed at one’s group as a group” (ibid., 28–29). These are precisely the pitfalls that Lewis’s approach fails to avoid.

Lewis has written extensively about the ongoing civil war in Somalia, for example, in a recently updated essay called *Understanding Somalia and Somaliland: Culture, History, Society* (2008).²² In this book, Somali clans (and clanship as principle of Somali political organization) feature as self-evident, stable, “natural” categories that effortlessly undergird the narrative of events. For Lewis, the increasing virulence of the construct of clan in the Somali civil war hardly needs any explanation; has no history; does not intersect with identities other than clan; is not actively and overwhelmingly shaped by spin and mythical hate-narratives; is always cause and never consequence; is in short, as it were, “primordial” and outside history. Throughout, Lewis presents clans (to use Hinton’s term) as “containers of natural identity” or (to use Wolf’s metaphor) as billiard balls spinning off each other as smooth, unchanging, self-contained, internally undifferentiated entities (Hinton 2002, 27; Wolf 1982, 6–7). For example, because the head of Barre’s National Security Service (NSS) “belonged” to a particular clan, Lewis, by implicitly equating individual and group, appears to associate that whole clan with the NSS and to explain the clan-based violence the clan suffered in Mogadishu in early 1991 in terms of that association (Lewis 2008, 74). This is “guilt by association.” It may well capture the way those who committed the violence justified their acts, however, such reductive and essentializing notions, which represent a continuation of the colonial clan paradigm, are at the heart of the reason why anthropologists of genocide such as Hinton (2002, 18), Eltringham (2004, 4), and others have criticized both the totalizing concepts of an older anthropology and the uncritical adoption of identity constructs that result from violence.²³ From the perspective of the alternative paradigm I outline here, Lewis’s approach to Somali clans and clanship constitutes not scholarly analysis but an *abstention from* such analysis, and lends academic authority to ways of thinking that are deeply implicated in violence.

If Lewis’s clan paradigm appears to fit the centrality and the meanings that Somali clan and clanship have taken on in the ongoing civil war, that is not, this essay argues, because he has been right about clan all along,²⁴ but because the colonial consensus that he once formalized and has promoted ever since is part of the epistemological genesis of the clan paradigm that exists today and has, therefore, helped produce it. This is a sobering view that leaves very little room for triumphalism. If

we, as scholars, continue to take current constructs of clan as natural, ahistorical, and thus inevitable, rather than try to lay bare the complex histories and contexts in which clan and clan hatreds take on their meaning and become a real historical force, we will be blind to the truly genocidal potential inherent in them. Though the capacity of scholarly discourses (however powerful, popular, and long lived) to influence Somali realities is severely limited, it has been the burden of this essay to argue that, unless we adopt an alternative paradigm, we may help conceal and foreclose the real political alternatives open to Somalis.

REFERENCES

- Appadurai, Arjun. 1998. Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalization. *Public Culture* 10, no. 2: 225–47.
- Besteman, Catherine Lowe. 1999. *Unraveling Somalia: Race, Violence, and the Legacy of Slavery*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Bowen, John R. 2002. Culture, Genocide, and a Public Anthropology. In *Annihilating Difference*, edited by A. L. Hinton, 382–95. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bradbury, Mark. 2008. *Becoming Somaliland*. London: Progressio.
- Bringa, Tone. 2002. Averted Gaze: Genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1992–1995. In *Annihilating Difference*, edited by A. L. Hinton, 194–225. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cassanelli, Lee V. 1982. *The Shaping of Somali Society: Reconstructing the History of a Pastoral People, 1600–1900*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Compagnon, Daniel. 1995. “Ressources politiques, régulation autoritaire et domination personnelle en Somalie: le régime de Siyaad Barre (1969–1991),” Ph.D. in Political Science at the Université de Pau et des Pays de l’Adour.
- . 1998. Somali Armed Movements: The Interplay of Political Entrepreneurship and Clan-Based Factions. In *African Guerrillas*, edited by Christopher Clapham, 73–89. Oxford: James Currey.
- Declich, Francesca. 2003. *I bantu della Somalia. Etnogenesi e rituali mviko*. Rome: Franco Angeli.
- Donham, Donald L. 2006. Staring at Suffering: Violence as a Subject. In *States of Violence: Politics, Youth, and Memory in Contemporary Africa*, edited by E. G. Bay and D. L. Donham, 16–33. Charlottesville: University of

- Virginia Press.
- Eltringham, Nigel. 2004. *Accounting for Horror: Post-Genocide Debates in Rwanda*. London: Pluto Press.
- Fearon, James D.; and David D. Laitin. 2000. Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity. *International Organization* 54, no. 4: 845–77.
- Feldman, Allen. 1995. Ethnographic States of Emergency. In *Fieldwork under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*, edited by C. Nordstrom and A. C. G. M. Robben, 224–52. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gardner, Judith; and Judy El Bushra, eds. 2004. *Somalia—The Untold Story: The War through the Eyes of Somali Women*. London: Pluto Press.
- Gesheker, Charles L. 1985. Anti-Colonialism and Class Formation: The Eastern Horn of Africa before 1950. *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 18, no. 1: 1–32.
- Helander, Bernard. 1999. Power and Poverty in Southern Somalia. In *The Poor Are Not Us: Poverty and Pastoralism in Eastern Africa*, edited by D. M. Anderson and V. Broch-Due, 91–105. Oxford: James Currey.
- Hinton, Alexander L. 2002. The Dark Side of Modernity: Toward an Anthropology of Genocide. In *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide*, edited by A. L. Hinton, 1–40. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hunt, Alan; and Gary Wickham. 1998. *Foucault and Law: Towards a Sociology of Law as Governance*. London: Pluto Press.
- Huntingford, George W. B. 1963. Review of *A Pastoral Democracy and Marriage and the Family in Northern Somaliland* by I. M. Lewis. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 26, no. 1: 223–24.
- Issa-Salwe, Abdisalam M. 1996. *The Collapse of the Somali State: The Impact of the Colonial Legacy*. London: Haan.
- Kapteijns, Lidwien. 1995. Review of *An Anthology of Somali Poetry* by B. W. Andrzejewski and Sheila Andrzejewski. *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28, no. 3: 662–64.
- . 1999. *Women's Voices in a Man's World: Women and the Pastoral Tradition in Northern Somali Orature, c. 1899–1980*. With Maryan Omar Ali. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Kapteijns, Lidwien; and Mursal Farah. 2001. Review of *A Pastoral Democracy* by I. M. Lewis, third ed. *Africa* 71, no. 4: 719–23.
- Kapteijns, Lidwien; and Jay Spaulding 1989. Class Formation and History in Precolonial Somali Society: A Research Agenda. *Northeast African Studies* 11, no. 1: 19–38.

- Laitin, David D.; and Said S. Samatar. 1987. *Somalia: Nation in Search of a State*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Lewis, Ioan M. 1968. Introduction. In *History and Anthropology*, edited by I. M. Lewis. London: Tavistock: ix–xxviii.
- . 1973. *The Anthropologist's Muse: An Inaugural Lecture*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science.
- . 1985 [1976]. *Social Anthropology in Perspective: The Relevance of Social Anthropology*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1999a. *Arguments with Ethnography: Comparative Approaches to History, Politics and Religion*. London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology vol. 70. London: The Athlone Press.
- . 1999b [1961]. *A Pastoral Democracy: A Study of Pastoralism and Politics among the Northern Somali of the Horn of Africa*. Oxford: James Currey with the International African Institute.
- . 2008. *Understanding Somalia and Somaliland: Culture, History, Society*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lieberman, Ben. 2006. Nationalist Narratives, Violence between Neighbours and Ethnic Cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina: A Case of Cognitive Dissonance. *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 3: 295–309.
- Little, Peter 1996. Conflictive Trade, Contested Identity: The Effects of Export Markets on Pastoralists of Southern Somalia. *African Studies Review* 39, no. 1: 25–53.
- Luling, Virginia. 2002. *Somali Sultanate: The Geledi City-State over 150 Years*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction.
- Mamdani, Mahmood. 1996. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- . 2009. *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics and the War on Terror*. New York: Pantheon.
- Meyer, Maaïke. 1996. In *Tekst gevat: Inleiding tot een kritiek van representatie*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Mills, Sara. 2004. *Discourse: The New Critical Idiom*. London: Routledge.
- Newbury, Catharine. 1998. Ethnicity and the Politics of History in Rwanda. *Africa Today* 45, no. 1: 7–24.
- Rayne, H. 1921. Somali Tribal Law. *Journal of the Royal African Society* 20, no. 78: 101–6.
- Samatar, Abdi. 1992. Destruction of State and Society in Somalia: Beyond the Tribal Convention. *Journal of Modern African Studies* 30, no. 4: 625–41.

- Samatar, Ahmed. 1994. "The Curse of Allah: Civic Disembowelment and the Collapse of the State in Somalia." In *The Somali challenge: From catastrophe to renewal?*, edited by Ahmed I. Samatar, 95–146. Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner.
- Samatar, Said S. 1991. *A Nation in Turmoil*. London: The Minority Rights Group.
- Schlee, Günther. 1989. *Identities on the Move: Clanship and Pastoralism in Northern Kenya*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press for the International African Institute.
- Togane, Mohamud Siad. <http://www.togane.org> (accessed 21 August 2009).
- Vianello, Alessandra; and Mohamed M. Kassim, eds. 2006. *Servants of the Sharia: The Civil Register of the Qadis' Court of Brava, 1893–1900*. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill.
- Willemsse, Karin. 2005. Darfur in War: The Politicization of Ethnic Identities? *ISIM Review* 15: 14–15.
- . 2007. *One Foot in Heaven: Narratives on Gender and Islam in Darfur, West-Sudan*. Leiden: Brill.
- . 2009. The Darfur War, Masculinity and the Construction of a Sudanese National Identity. In *Darfur and the Crisis of Governance in Sudan: A Critical Reader*, edited by S. Hassan and C. Ray. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, forthcoming, 213–32.
- Wingate, General Sir F. Reginald. 1909. *Special Mission to Somaliland*. Durham University Library, Archives and Special Collections. Sudan Archive (GB 0033 SAD, Box 125/7).
- Wolf, Eric. 1982. *Europe and the People without History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

NOTES

1. The festschrift referred to is Markus V. Hoehne and Virginia Luling, eds., *Peace and Milk, Drought and Warr: Somali Culture, Society and Politics: Essays in Honour of I. M. Lewis* (London: Hurst, 2010).
2. In contrast to Lewis's overall views of the social anthropological method (Lewis 1985), his position on Somali clans and clanship does not seem to have changed significantly since his first fieldwork in the late 1950s.
3. I would regard the work of Catherine Besteman (1999), Lee Cassanelli (1982), Daniel Compagnon (1995 and 1998), Gesheker (1985), Peter Little (1996), Abdi Samatar (1992), Ahmed Samatar (1994), and myself (among many

- others) as examples of this other paradigm.
4. Examples include the coastal towns of Seylac and the Banaadir coast, and the inland towns of Baardheere and Geledi.
 5. Lewis himself has written about many of these aspects of Somali society. The argument being developed here is about the weight given to these aspects in the Lewisian clan paradigm.
 6. It is far from certain that even the names and labels of clan groups have remained the same. See, for example, Schlee (1989).
 7. Examining the “genealogy” of clan discourse raises the question of how it became possible, that is to say, its “conditions of possibility” (Hunt and Wickham 1998, 119).
 8. The following draws on Kapteijns and Farah (2001).
 9. Lewis (1999a: 5) has argued that one should distinguish between doing research under the protection of colonial rule and doing so in its service. I agree with him. The argument here is about the content of the epistemology he adopted.
 10. Even the terminology that we use today originates with Lewis. According to Huntingford (1963), the terms “tribe” and “confederacies” had been used in ethnographic work before Lewis introduced “clan” and “clan families.”
 11. Rayne’s vignettes illustrate the (at times) inordinate power of interpreters. This was also emphasized in Lieutenant-General Sir R. Wingate’s “Special Mission to Somaliland” in 1909 (Wingate 1909, SAD 125, 7).
 12. I have argued that even my beloved teacher, the famous linguist and literary scholar B. W. Andrzejewski, who avoided the study of clan and politics, was insufficiently critical of how the dominant Somali literary tradition undervalued women’s poetry and other “non-prestigious” genres (Kapteijns 1995).
 13. If primordialists, as Fearon and Laitin 2000 define them, believe that groups have unchanging, essential characteristics that, if not bred into the genes, have been hard wired into their culture, then Lewis’s work is, of course, not primordialist, though primordialist thinking thrives in the shelter of its authority.
 14. For example, the idea that all social institutions contributed toward the maintenance of a stable social structure was abandoned.
 15. Lewis (1973, 11–12) discusses how deeply influenced anthropologists often are by the interpretations of their key informants: “It is *we*, not *they*, who are the puppets.”

16. This violence perpetrated by the Barre regime forms a crucial context for the example on which I focus here. The purpose here is to present an approach that would be relevant to the analysis of any kind of clan-based behavior.
17. Compagnon's 1995, 453–463 and 1998, 83–85) analysis of political entrepreneurs and clan-based factions presents a superb conceptualization of how the concept of clan gained particular and changing meanings and significance.
18. Appadurai (1998) refers to “dead certainty” during Barre’s military regime in the context of the Rwanda genocide. He claims that the “other,” who was supposed to be so different that s/he should be killed, could in reality hardly be recognized, and so could only be truly differentiated from the “self” through the very act of killing.
19. Such people include influential scholars such as Lewis himself.
20. Maxamed Faarax Caydiid, Axmed Cumar Jeex, and Maxamed Siciid Xirsi “Morgan” are just a few prominent examples. Most of the major warlords played some role either in the Barre’s military regime or in an armed opposition front (or both) before the state collapse.
21. An example is “Afwayne’s Swan Song” of 26 February 2006—Afwayne or “Big Mouth” being Maxamed Siyaad Barre’s nickname—in which Togane analyzes the dictator’s legacy while citing Sartre, Dante, and Rudyard Kipling and making comparative references to Hitler, Mussolini, and Papa Doc. He also reproduces, often but not always critically, the clan stereotypes and hate-narratives that Somalis produce about each other.
22. In this section, I draw on my review of this book in the *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 42, no. 1 (2009): 284–86.
23. Both refer to the dangers of anthropological and social scientific concepts and their focus on (or even obsession with) difference.
24. Meanwhile, the analyses by those who have insisted on deconstructing clan have largely failed to take into account how powerful and real a historical force the construct of clan is and has been.

