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Somalia and the Dissolution of the Nation-State

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Significant debates loom on the periphery of anthropology about the longevity and future of the nation-state. These debates have even bled into nightly newscasts, daily newsprint, and mainstream publishing concerns.[1] While some experts and academics believe they see worldwide anarchy forecast in myriad ethnic handwritings on the wall, the fact that real world walls have actually tumbled encourages others to predict the emergence of regional and even world unity. Nor is it just intellectuals concerned with such issues: all we need do is think back to recent political rhetoric positing a new world order to recognize policymakers similarly confused over whether the world will dissolve into chaos or rebuild toward utopia.

No matter how rigorously historians, sociologists, political scientists, economists, politicians, and pundits engage in discussions over the direction in which the dissolution of the nation-state is taking us, the process of dissolution itself remains woefully underexplored. Even as anthropologists, we increasingly engage in rethinking every other issue cast out by these other disciplines—and the problems raised by ethnicity, nationalism, and the dissociation of state structure from civil society[2]—yet we, too, ignore dissolution as itself a condition. In part we probably do so because we have a history of discomfort when it comes to units of analysis the size of the nation-state (Moore 1987). Alternatively, perhaps we, like others, have succumbed to thinking of the nation-state in such anthropomorphic terms that we forget it is actually peopled; nation-states are contexts rather than subjects for ethnography. On the other hand, it is also likely that we ignore dissolution because it is too chaotic; by the definition of our forebears, we do not expect to find social order or structure when crisis ruptures into anarchy. Buttressing all of this may be a corollary assumption that dissolution is "only" a gap, a temporary break, an unsightly breach. It is not the breach but the fill on either side that invariably beckons us to excavate. However, for anyone who has been caught in a situation of impending dissolution, as was I while pursuing fieldwork in Mogadishu in 1988–89, it is definitely not emptiness alone that fills the air.

On July 9, 1989, the bishop of Mogadishu was shot and killed. Then, on July 14, 1989, government troops opened fire on Muslim worshipers as they were leaving Friday noon (*juma*) prayer. According to some reports, the death toll from these shootings outside prominent Mogadishu mosques numbered in the hundreds, although Somali opposition movements claimed fatalities in the thousands. Regardless, the violence sparked fear and further fighting, which in turn had a number of confusing—even contradictory—effects.

To this day, no authoritative explanation exists as to how the bishop's assassination should be linked to the government shootings or why the government shootings took place on that particular (Black) Friday.[3] The government claimed antigovernment rioting; however, numerous rumors floated about at the time, rumors that variously blamed Muslim fundamentalists or government agents posing as fundamentalists for the bishop's assassination, which then led to the arrest of prominent Muslim clerics, resulting in planned (or spontaneous?) protests to follow Friday's sermons. Of course, it was also suggested that the government fomented these demonstrations on purpose—or that there was no demonstrating at all until troops ringing the mosques opened fire. Meanwhile, all that was clear given the swirl of rumors was that it seemed as though the city would come unglued as a result, and that the national government, run by a

president increasingly mocked as nothing more than the mayor of Mogadishu, was about to fall.[4]

Of course, the government did fall—figuratively probably well before this moment, but literally not for another two years. In fact, one could argue that the lack of any centralized, credible source of information not only led to a lack of clarity in Mogadishu then (and since) but also both precipitated and delayed collapse. No one was strong enough or convincing enough to foist his or her view of what had occurred or what should occur on a fracturing nation. Or, to rephrase this, because neither the facts nor the fabrication of logic could be agreed to for, by, or among Somalis, dissolution could occur, but it had to occur bit by bit.

The fit and fitfulness of events—not just the bishop's death and Black Friday but a subsequent rise in crime, lack of cash in the banks, withdrawal of expatriates, increase in government-sponsored repression, and success of disunited oppositions—then fed into and on one another in such a way that July 14 itself could be woven into disparate logics—as a beginning, turning, or ending point.

Certainly the singularity of July 14, the most massive unleashing of government force in the capital ever, altered with the passage of time. On July 15 it was still of earthshaking relevance. By July 21, with no cathartic follow-up, it had already lost some momentousness. Meanwhile, three months later, on the 20th anniversary of Siad Barre's accession to power, the fact of July 14 reminded people of their failure to attain change, while after January 1991 (with the fall of the regime), July 14 could again be recast . . . and so on, suggesting that dates, despite our analytic dependence on them, may amount to little more than convenient tabs. What they memorialize seems largely situational, a matter of evanescent mood and thought-provoking emotion, critical at the time but unrecoverable later. Consequently, we are misled by what we look back on as gradual and measured. But this is not only because hindsight streamlines confusion; it is also because hindsight cannot adequately account for how a safe "before" is made significant only during a violent "after."

The situation before was concrete, yet impossible to pinpoint. During November 1988 it was common for men to emerge from Mogadishu's central bank with plastic sacksful of money, and no one robbed them; by November 1989 men were being shot for their LandCruisers. In November 1988 women could walk about at night wearing gold jewelry without having to fear for their safety; by November 1989 the fear of rape and robbery precluded many women from being out on the streets after dark. Meanwhile, no matter how incrementally steady such an escalation may have seemed retrospectively, there was nothing gradual about individual changes in behavior; rather, they were binary. In this sense, the onset of fear was no more graduated than the actual commission of any singular violent act.

Almost paradoxically, then, while people lived differently after they were jolted by the appearance (or apparition) of violence, this jolt was neither uniform nor universal across Mogadishu, nor did it strike everyone at the same time. Instead, different people dipped into violence, or were submerged, at different points. Ultimately, too, how one experienced violence was a matter of what one was reacting to, whether economics, hunger, greed, or sudden misfortune; simply the reactions of others; or theft, burglary, rape, imprisonment, or execution.

Still, as new as certain forms of disturbance were to Mogadishu, it was not as though violence was a complete unknown within Somalia: a civil war was raging in northern Somalia during this same period. Reports indicated that Hargeisa, the second largest city, had been bombed and blasted to smithereens. The obvious question, then, was to what extent Mogadishu was eroding. Would it begin to resemble Hargeisa? Or would it simply dissolve into the livable anarchy of a Beirut? Somalis from all walks of life not only understood the imagery and implications of Beirut but were aware of much of the world beyond their borders. Regular BBC broadcasts in Somali and other sources provided news of things beyond the Horn. Many Somalis had firsthand experience of

pitals, foreign cities, and even foreign crime. Perhaps, then, it was no stretch that Mogadishu's violence would simply continue on the smaller scale, ıg individual lives but not municipal life, something like nearby Nairobi—or ın Salvador, or even New York.

because they had so much information from without but so little credible g from within, residents of Mogadishu never quite knew whether to be or pessimistic, whether to consider mounting crime and lawlessness as a temporary dysfunction or significant disjuncture, or whether dissolution rely continue to threaten without actually leading to anything else.[5]

ıile, the whole issue of "becoming" (was Mogadishu becoming a Nairobi?) ns us through dilemmas of space to time. Was violence being viewed cyclically ', globally or locally, relatively or absolutely? The potential for contradiction ıg. For instance, when the local macro view (Muslim) is cyclical but the ense is linear, grounded in the realities of "now"/today following "then"/yes- at can any one person be expected to think? That this is only one end, implying inning? Or that this is *the* end?

The Sense of Dissolution

', what may well mark dissolution from within is the feeling among a people ıre at the end of time or, more reductively, that their time is ending with no ning conceivable in this lifetime. In fact, I believe this is what lies at the heart ion and what confuses us about it. By definition, dissolution itself is chaotic. :ss, when we view it with hindsight or with more information than any one caught in chaos can possess, we see structure all around. Of course, we also ally make structure as soon as we strive to make sense of how, what, when, d why chaos exists. In part, too, structure must exist; if all institutions were to ng would remain (Yoffee and Cowgill 1988). Yet the very things archaeologists ologists have available: emotions, sentiments, sensibilities. And these—how l, know, think, fear, believe, and disbelieve all at once—are precisely what can e to ethnologists, yet make no sense to individuals. Confoundingly, we may hat dissolution is marked by an utter collapse of all institutions save one—the that keeps things afloat enough to allow the development of a sense that the ld one has depended on is failing.

ɔertrophic growth and dependence on this one institution may, in turn, ıe most telltale sign of impending dissolution—whether this institution has enealogical, theocratic, or party roots. In the Somali case, genealogy made for ; moralities. Thus, it was not violence alone that triggered dissolution; rather, roke out as (or because) these subaltern moralities broke through. Once the d no longer physically protect citizens either from its own excesses or from iminals seeking unfair advantage from below, control was overtly up for grabs.

national or even citywide morality, a general regroupment at, from, and ng the center intensified. Increasingly, people found themselves falling back · and clan members they knew and could trust. Consequently, interest groups lial form while what one group regarded as defensive posturing appeared e and aggressive to another, provoking misreadings that only heated up the :e of misreading.

some groups did better than others and some citizens were more protected. ess, like some sort of quick-setting cement, mistrust hardened as distinctions elf-protection, self-assertion, and self-aggrandizement ran together, with no listinction possible among the three beyond every group's holding itself most yet most worthy. Not surprisingly, this is precisely how Somalis of all ages, d backgrounds laid the blame: dissolution had been precast through self-privi-

leging behavior on the part of those who controlled the center, which in turn defined who belonged.

But does hypertrophy on such a scale always lead to dissolution? That is one question for further study, and there are others. Is there an organization to dissolution? Is dissolution stoppable? Each of these questions requires far more comparative work. The last is simply a thinly disguised way to ask whether Somalia had to fall apart, whether Bosnia had to be ripped asunder, and whether we are talking about forces being beyond control, out of control, or in whose control. In part, of course, the issue of control is a matter of faith; either dissolution is man-made or it is not. "If not" is beyond our purview here. Nevertheless, no matter what one's suasion, dissolution is dramatic; it may be even more of a truism to say that chaos is arresting. But for how long?

Theoretical Answers—And More Questions

Subjectively, dissolution holds terror and fear in endless proportions. Objectively, as a period of time within a larger flow, dissolution may simply mark the underside of the cycle of history: out of chaos comes order. Taken cyclically, history is often projected in a way that finds people spiraling through periods of murkiness and brilliance or decadence and puritanism. Meanwhile, the impetus from degeneration to regeneration seems to lie in a defining period of warfare or death and destruction. Our earliest recorded narratives hammer home this view. Cleansing floods, cleansing fires, cataclysmic earthquakes, and righteous battles are found in Gilgamesh, the Old Testament, the Koran, and Hindu, Hopi, and countless other origin myths. This theme of purity-out-of-suffering has been a major literary preoccupation ever since. Even new media transmit the same old message; Hollywood, Bombay, and other cinematic centers concoct limitless trappings for this recurrent message of salvation.

Revolutionaries, reactionaries, cult leaders, and followers of millenarian movements all preach and attempt to turn into practice the notion that good emerges from the destruction or dismissal or dissolution of the status quo. In less global and apocalyptic terms, Ibn Khaldun (1967) and Owen Lattimore (1962), among others, describe versions of similar cycles to account for the competition between the desert and the sown. Such a history has been written for Oman (Wilkinson 1987), while social structure in Saudi Arabia has been swept clean by successive waves of Wahabbi-inspired power seekers. More recently, Iran appears to have added yet another spiral to the on-again, off-again Persian acceptance of conspicuous consumption and luxury. Indeed, as Gellner (1981) demonstrates, one can find instances of "flux and reflux" from northern Africa through the Middle East.

Meanwhile, anthropologists outside of Islam should be familiar with such pendulum swings when thinking in terms of hierarchy and autonomy/equality. These are the poles Edmund Leach (1964) points to in his famous model describing Kachin oscillation between *gumsa* and *gumlao*, while Victor Turner (1974) sets forth a similar apposition between structure and what he calls *communitas*.

It may well be that if Somalia were examined in deeper context (or even sliced out of a regionally wider *longue durée*), the period of order, stability, and statehood that appears to have suddenly ruptured would itself look temporary and comparatively insignificant. After all, prior to independence in 1960, there had been no such thing as a united Somalia or a cohesive Somali state (Laitin and Samatar 1987; Lewis 1980). Alternatively, a deeper view might even suggest that there is nothing novel or even particular about the current Somali solution to hierarchy. Nomads typically shift allegiances whenever leaders become too overbearing. Or, to rephrase this again, once enough Somalis realized that they were being failed by structures of state, it was only a matter of time before so much inequity would provoke them to regain autonomy through anarchy.

However, there may be a problem with lending so much dynamism to such cycling. This view of a continual shuttling back and forth between order and disorder may give

ıal weight to both forces. Do periods of disorder ever last as long as periods
'erhaps instead we should regard dissolution as the liminal phase between
ıts of order and structure. In this case we must be able to identify the moments
ınd set the liminal period apart (van Gennep 1960). The problem this poses
dsight continually shifts the moments that should be considered most
ith causality often read backward through time. Different beginnings can be
nding on who is doing the reading and in what light. Also, if we regard
as liminal, chaos does not pause people for long. Even in chaos humans are
rouping to create (or re-create) order. Some might even argue that this is
ıs conflict: competition over control of whichever institution still works. In
ls, as Turner hints but cannot allow himself to say, there *is* structure in
ıs.
ıg to Turner, liminality is called forth by crises, while different crises call for
tuals—puberty for initiations, death for funerals, marriage for weddings, feud
noney. Thus, no matter how liminal the period, the ritual of liminality is
ıctured. Turner goes so far as to suggest that it is in crises that we see the
f society itself revealed, embedded, and disembedded. However, his formula
an be learned about structure by studying moments of crisis applies to
l communities. The question we now face concerns prolonged crisis or
. Is this a matter simply of longer time, or of expanded space as well? And in
ıe?
noment, the frame appears to be that of the nation-state, but this is also the
one by dissolution. Perhaps, then, we are not casting widely enough. Thanks
ving of boundaries, nation-states have fixed geographical and even chrono-
ting and ending points. We regard them as finite end-products of a process
re. We also like to believe they evoke order. But what if we were to regard
ad as kinetic middles to something else? In a sense, this is what all the
over the future of the nation-state already suggest. We are slowly coming to
our fixed forms do hold the potential for becoming unfixed, and that many
have been fixed enough for legions of individuals to begin with—or,
ly, were far too literally fixed. At some future date it may well be that this
ıationalism will be seen as one of chaos and not order; conceivably, nation-
turn out to be just fillers between far longer imperial moments. For some,
ıg along these lines is scary, while others are exhilarated.
t of anthropologists? On the one hand, shouldn't we be able to be of some
nowing what we know about cultures and societies through time, which at
compromise and bricolage arrived at through conflict and change? On the
l, perhaps we would do better to be among those most terrified, knowing
ı in the imbalance of dissolution and how this threatens the lives of individuals
tes of whole segments of society and cultures we purport to care so much

eless, rather than entering the debate, we seem paralyzed, which is puzzling.
nean we do not regard this as within our domain, although the people faced
lution certainly are? Or is it that dissolution itself has already claimed
ogy and, being unstoppable, is costing us a future?

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1. As examples of the range, consider Graubard 1993, Hall 1985, Hobsbawm 1990, Kaplan 1994, Mann 1986, Moynihan 1993, Pfaff 1993, and Young 1993.
2. See, for example, Eriksen 1993, Nash 1989, and Tambiah 1986.
3. For a closer and more detailed examination of these events and their repercussions, see Simons 1995a.
4. I examine the significance of rumors *as* knowledge and the broken nature of information in Mogadishu in Simons 1995b, and I examine the significance of how such broken information helped lead to dissolution in Simons 1995a.
5. The relationship between violence and dissolution is not a neat one—which may be part of what defines dissolution differently from collapse or breakdown. In dissolution, pieces and people float out of control as if in slow motion, without an effective paroxysm resulting in either death or rebirth of anything systemic. Violence is more opportunistic than carefully orchestrated. For instance, on July 14 and during the few days that immediately followed, there were at least seven varieties of violence, some of which were new in Mogadishu, others of which had not been seen in years, and some of which had "always" been previously suppressed. (1) On July 14, the government ordered soldiers to open fire on worshipers, claiming self-defense before the worshipers had an opportunity to promulgate violence themselves. (2) Soldiers then searched for targets throughout the city and yanked people out of their homes, especially at night. (3) Specific groups of Somalis were purposely executed. (4) On the pretext of rounding up suspects, soldiers raped and looted. (5) Posing as soldiers, thugs raped and looted. (6) Taking advantage of the situation, private vendettas were acted out. (7) Some citizens sought to defend themselves.

Meanwhile, none of these situations was independent from the others, nor did any last permanently. As a result, it may be a mistake to view violence as the most appropriate marker of dissolution, because which forms of violence should count most? On the other hand, not only did violence elsewhere continue to serve as a gauge against which to measure the tide of trouble in Mogadishu but it was violence in the broadest sense that symbolically, literally, and poignantly made life so ultimately unlivable, attenuated, and out-of-control for most citizens.

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