Mozambique
(Photo: Joel Chiziane)

Fieldwork under Fire

Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival

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Carolyn Nordstrom
Antonius C. G. M. Robben

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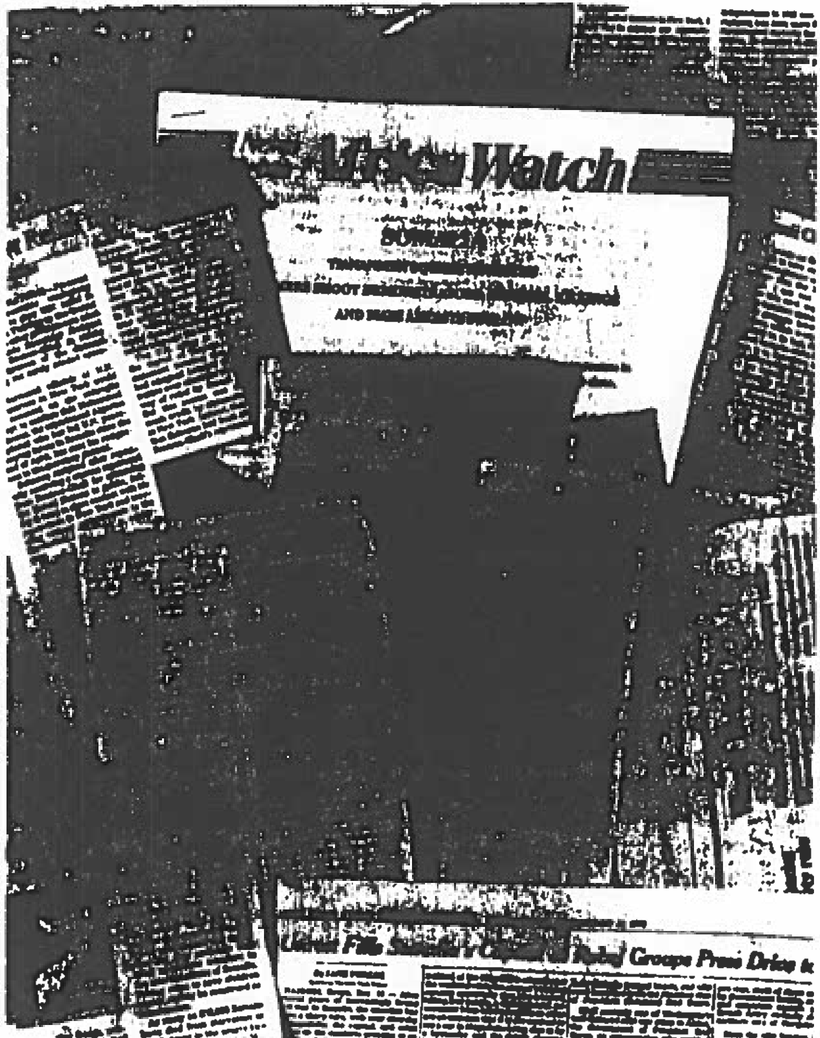
RUMOR



News: Cause or Effect?
(Photo: John T. Jordan, Jr.)

The Beginning of the End

Anna Simons

It was always possible during the first November I was in Mogadishu to pass through a shady but still hot downtown and watch Somali men nonchalantly emerge from the Central Bank with bulging plastic bags full of bundled Somali shillings. No one accosted, confronted, or robbed people of such obvious means. One year later, that scene was inextricably altered: Land Cruisers were being carjacked, and no one blithely walked anywhere anymore with telltale sacks of money.

During the year I happened to be in Mogadishu (1988–1989), I witnessed a transformation that social scientists more often analyze as aftermath than as action. Midway through my stay, Mogadishu erupted with violence that briefly gained it world attention. That was on July 14, 1989, and the violence then (as we shall see) involved government troops and civilians. It was acute violence and did not immediately recur. Nevertheless, by the time I left Mogadishu in November 1989, it was more than apparent that the entire "nation" was on a cusp: the blister of discontent had to either burst or callous over; either Somalis would work out their differences once and for all in what everyone predicted could only be a paroxysm of violence or individuals would become inured and the nation would be able to carry on.

Of course, now, in 1993, hindsight already makes it seem obvious that Somalia slid over the cusp in a horrific way. But hindsight is not yet 20/20; there is still time for people to become irreversibly inured to violence, if they have not already. Indeed, one of the new givens may be that as long as automatic weapons and weapons suppliers exist, Mogadishu may never return to quiescence. Or, alternatively, Mogadishu may have finally entered the arena of world capitals that proclaim control over nations but cannot provide security within their own municipal limits.

In examining the sketchy beginnings of what has led to this end, we face two theoretical issues. One concerns hindsight: Is it a potentially misleading analytical tool? The second ponders the length, breadth, and depth of social memory and its markers. Each of these is critical to anthropology given our current penchant to project back through time in order to contextualize settings. Perhaps the clues we retool for analysis will not stand the test of time. Or perhaps we can already guess at the historical implications of July 14.

What complicates the interpretation of events is the role rumors play. During moments of crisis and, indeed, in general in Somalia on the cusp, rumors composed knowledge. Not only were rumors the only source of information to publicly circulate but the conflicting nature of competing rumors also made plain to people that they *were* relying on rumors for information. Obviously, rumors were manufactured. The questions to be asked, then, were, by whom? why? when?—which themselves generated conjecture and the construction of new logics.

These logics that linked "fact" to "fact" to "fact" may be no less informative now. Outside the press of immediacy and taken together, they reveal that there may have been no privileged view, that the composition of reality *was* situational, person-dependent, and unduplicatable from individual to individual, that facts were often linked up haphazardly depending on what was available but not necessarily "truly" related. As a result, explanations tended to overreach themselves and sought too much complicity, conspiracy, and intentionality in situations for which there had been no previous practice—or forethought.

Nevertheless, based on their own internal consistencies, rumors could seem convincing and could compel people to action, never mind that hindsight would later prove them wrong. At the time, we must remember, no rumor *could* be right. Proof would have canonized it as truth, not supposition, while as supposition, rumor narrowed the possibilities not only for what to think but also for in which direction to look for the future. Ironically, that is precisely where hindsight would be waiting to neaten the passage (and eliminate alternative explanations), after the fact. And narrative?

There are numerous different perspectives from which to consider the visitation of violence on Mogadishu, the bureaucratic center of a country that can be divided differently according to what you believe you are unpeeling: geographic, or linguistic, or socioeconomic, or genealogical segments, each potentially as critical to the dissociation of the "nation" and its capital as the next.

For instance, sometime between 1969 when he declared himself leader of Somalia and 1989 when he was being ridiculed as the "Mayor of Mogadishu," President Mohamed Siad Barre lost his grip. All of Somalia's peripheries began to swing out of control, exposing a center that felt

threatened and undermined yet was itself perceived to be acting threateningly and brutally. Again, these peripheries can be described in a number of ways. For instance, by 1988, the north had become an entire region within which the central government was waging war. The regime's opponents were northerners, who tend to belong to the Isaq clan, which comprise most of the membership of the extremely successful opposition Somali National Movement (only one of a number of clan-based oppositions). Hence members of other clans within the army were being forced to take sides in a dispute that could be read either empathetically, as one of opposition to a corrupt regime, or dispassionately, as one of clan rivalries and reconfigurations being worked out over control of state resources—with all of this (on the broadest scale) eerily reassembling the former divide between northern British Somaliland and southern Italian Somalia, which themselves originated as cookie-cutter shapes imposed on nonstate (Somali) peoples by colonial (European) powers. That is one scan of the macro picture.

A second scan might hone in on Siad Barre's dictatorship and blame that for Somalia's demise. In brief, Siad Barre came to power in a military coup in 1969, pledging to stem clannism and corruption, which—initially, and to his great credit—he did. However, his government's involvement in the Ogaden War in 1977–1978 and Somalia's subsequent defeat by a Soviet-backed Ethiopia unraveled his successes. Economically, politically, and even tribally, Siad Barre reacted as if under siege; many suggest that Siad Barre sought to shift blame to others for Somalia's loss in the war. Such blame and his own retrenchment then served to reintroduce clannism, while the return of Western aid and assistance (to counter the Soviet presence in Ethiopia) renewed and fueled corruption. A potent combination, which in the decade to follow steadily lost Siad Barre so much support and control that it becomes increasingly difficult to work backward and fathom, first, why violence did not occur sooner, and second, why (and whether) it was one particular thing *or* nothing in particular that then set it off.

At the microchronological level we find Monsignor Salvatore Colombo, an Italian national and the archbishop of Mogadishu, shot and killed on July 9, 1989, while five days later, on Friday, July 14, government troops opened fire on Muslim worshipers as they were leaving Friday's *juma* (noontime) mosque services. Two days of street fighting followed. Mass arrests, civilian massacres, rapes, and lootings also took place. While Hargeisa, the northern capital, was already unlivable (having been bombed and strafed by government forces the previous summer), this was the first large-scale violence in Mogadishu in fourteen years.[1]

JULY 14

At the time the shooting started, I was in a compound rented for American military advisers by the U.S. government from a Somali general. Only one adviser was home, and two Somali watchmen were on duty at the front gate.

At first I thought Bastille Day had begun early, as the French embassy was planning a gala celebration. However, the embassy was too far away and it was just after noon, too early for fireworks. No, this had to be something else. And by the time I had thought that through, it was increasingly obvious that gunfire was coming from many different directions at once, although Mogadishu's spread made it impossible to know the extent of the shooting until the American walkie-talkie net began to crackle with broadcasts.

All "official" Americans (those working directly for the embassy or for USAID or on contract to a U.S. government agency) were supplied with walkie-talkies, not only with this eventuality in mind but simply for the sake of communications. Mogadishu's telephone system was considered to be abysmal at best.

Because official Americans lived in pockets scattered throughout the city, it was possible to get some sense of what was going on out of direct hearing range as people reported in on the net. However, as most people were located within largely elite neighborhoods, it was never entirely clear what was happening throughout the city. All the embassy officials could confirm over the walkie-talkies was that the Somali army was involved in the fighting. While most people later admitted to assuming this marked the beginning of a revolution or a coup, such conjecture was never broadcast. If anything, the embassy was extremely circumspect in its pronouncements. For instance, when one woman clicked on to ask about reports of an anti-Christian element to the uprising, she was told that it would be better to avoid that topic for the moment.

Meanwhile, my own (ir)rationale at the time was that if this was really a significant confrontation, there would have to be a cataclysmic, massive shootout to prove it. Consequently, I spent the whole day and that first night anticipating a sudden crescendo of gunfire. Instead, I heard only small-arms fire. Still, I was probably more anxious waiting for what did not occur than I was about the bullets that did occasionally zing over our roof.

Throughout the day Americans were advised to stay indoors and to keep their walkie-talkies with them throughout the evening and night. Roll calls were taken regularly. However, very little new information was offered.

As an unofficial American (without my name on the roll or the privilege of my own walkie-talkie but fortunate enough to be in an official house whose inhabitants did count as far as the U.S. embassy was concerned), I had to wonder what the few other unofficial Americans in Mogadishu had to be thinking, with no access to any sort of communications. What would happen to those of us who did not count should an evacuation become necessary? The embassy had proved time and time again just how rigid their socioeconomic hierarchy *and* disinterest in us was. Indeed, I knew from one of the six World Bank-employed but unofficial Americans evacuated from Hargeisa the previous year that when they suddenly arrived in Mogadishu (via UN transport) after a harrowing five days in that besieged northern town, all the consular officers offered were change-of-address cards.

Meanwhile, I was still better protected than, say, the watchmen on duty just inside the compound gates who knew little more than we did; Radio Mogadishu, still in government hands, was not very informative either. However, the watchmen too seemed to think this might be the beginning of the end of the regime, and despite continued shooting in the distance, they headed home before dark—the only way to find out whether their own families were safe.

Early the next morning (Saturday), the shooting had died down. The government announced the imposition of a dusk-to-dawn curfew, although the American embassy continued to warn its employees not to leave their homes. The BBC provided more concrete information than the walkie-talkies did, reporting casualty figures cited by the government as 23 killed (the number was later revised to 32) and 59 injured, as opposed to the opposition's figures, which counted the dead in the thousands. Meanwhile, the Somali government's position was that it had responded to violent demonstrations. The various opposition groups, in contrast, condemned the government for having willfully ordered troops to open fire on worshipers leaving juma prayer.

The curfew felt like citywide house arrest. Although there was still shooting once dark fell Saturday night, despite—or perhaps because of—the curfew, Sunday was quiet. By Monday the embassy was allowing most people to return to work in certain parts of the city, advising everyone to avoid traveling downtown or through other areas where the fighting had been fiercest (and where there were still thought to be pockets of trouble). Still, Monday was not quite normal.

Not surprisingly during those first few days, most of the Somalis I knew were extremely reticent about discussing what they thought had occurred and why they thought violence had finally erupted. All I was told when I asked about the present mood in Mogadishu's neighborhoods was that I should not go downtown and that under no circumstances should I ride

the local buses (my normal means of transport). No one was sure that there was anti-European sentiment so much as they were unsure of just what people were feeling and what might set them off.

Within the English-speaking expatriate community, however, there was no dearth of commentary. According to a number of expatriate eyewitnesses and at least one Somali, there *was* an anti-Christian element to some of the "rioting." At least one woman was chased down a residential street by a mob of men yelling "*gaal, gaal*" (infidel) before a Somali family pulled her to safety inside their compound, and several of the houses occupied by nonproselytizing Mennonites were ransacked by Somalis who clearly knew whose homes they were ransacking (no other American homes were violated).

Because these stories began to circulate relatively quickly in the expatriate community, there was a heightened sense of concern that Somalis were turning or would turn anti-Western, and anti-American in particular. The normally besieged mentality of expatriates in Somalia ("a hardship post") was certainly (and perhaps justifiably) heightened as a consequence of the random incidents directed at them on July 14.

Meanwhile, Somalis had altogether different safety concerns. After all, it was Somalis who were being killed by other Somalis. Indeed, the danger for Somalis was on an altogether different plane than it ever was for Americans. For instance, in the days immediately following July 14, it was commonly asserted by a number of Somalis I knew that Siad Barre had armed all members of his (Marehan) clan living within Mogadishu. In response, other groups were apparently arming themselves—for defense, not offense. One person, for example, assured me that people who were unable to purchase firearms were buying bows and poisoned arrows for protection. At the same time, a young woman recounted the arguments taking place within her family about whether or not to flee into "the bush." Already her mother had buried most of the family's gold.

Corollary to this rampant fear, though, was a distinct rise in expectations throughout the first week. People expected and talked about the likelihood of there being more bloodshed on the following Friday, the 21st. For expatriates, the expectation was that if there was more unrest, they would finally be forced to leave the country that none of them particularly cared for and that many of them had assumed, from their very first day, would sink into chaos. Indeed, on my second full day in Somalia eight months previous, a USIS bureaucrat told me that I should not bother to begin any research; she kept one bag always packed, ready for flight; Somalia was going to blow.

However, on that Friday, July 21, government forces were conspicuous throughout town, imposing a de facto curfew, while the embassies imposed a de jure one, and from midmorning until late afternoon at least

one small scout plane flew menacingly low over the city's rooftops. In the end, after so much anticipation (of both good and bad), there was no trouble on that day. Instead, people gradually returned to being anxious about the more routine grind of daily living and how to survive.

By the time I and most of the other expatriates ventured downtown again, nothing appeared to be physically out of place. It was as if no shooting had occurred, no massacres or atrocities had been committed. There was nothing beyond the sense of a troubled future shattered. Indeed, beyond the memory of gunfire, the only tangible evidence that anything *had* happened was the government-imposed ban on visiting the beaches—the usual weekend escape for Mogadishu's elite and many expatriates. With most expatriates already feeling that Somalia offered no pleasures, this circumscription (supposedly enforced because prisoners had been taken to, shot, and disposed of on the beaches) only further heightened the sense that the country deserved to be cut adrift.

At the same time, it is significant that I did not hear any expatriates talk about Somalis they knew who had been killed or imprisoned—a small indication of how circumscribed expatriate existence was. Many Somalis did have friends who had been killed or were arrested and dragged away, and certainly most knew of someone in their neighborhood who had disappeared. However, as this was still not a good time to wander freely, it is hard for me to say what effect the violence had within Somali neighborhoods—an admission that itself should indicate the chronic distance between expatriate and Somali existences, which, now that it was acutely visible, also froze me.

Yet, despite new physical limitations and obstacles, speech was suddenly less controlled, and a brief window of honesty opened between fears not realized and expectations not met. Sometime after the first week and into the second, when it became clear that change was not going to occur overnight but that change was still "about" to occur, Somalis began to talk openly—for the first time—about tribalism, the regime, and the horrors it was perpetrating. Up to this point open discussion of tribe or clan, which was illegal, had been virtually nonexistent. People spoke in euphemisms when discussing "family" and lineage, which is why, during this brief hiatus, it was as if a lid on several pots had been lifted at the same time, invigorating the air with a whole new feeling. Indeed, everyone I knew (from the watchmen at the compound gates to World Bank-dependent civil servants) became eager to explain to me just how many wrongs Siad Barre and his fellow clan members, the Marehan, had committed (all Marehan were lumped together in these castigations).

Unfortunately, though, this window of discussion lasted less than two weeks before it closed again, for (I believe) one reason: nothing was happening. There was no further violence aimed *at* the government, only

further violence undertaken *by* the government. This violence increasingly took the form of mass arrests, death by firing squad, lootings, and rapes. It was directed by soldiers and thugs against the citizenry when they were most vulnerable—in their own homes and at night. As a consequence, people became uncertain again, of everything and everyone.

As this continued, Black Friday (as July 14 was dubbed) became less and less potent as a catalyst for immediate change. This passing, though, yielded a second effect. People were pausing; theories finally began to emerge and circulate as to what had happened on July 14. Also, it was only in the aftermath of July 14 that the assassination of the bishop became significant.

Most stories I heard from Somalis in Mogadishu linked Black Friday to the date (if not the act) of the bishop's assassination. However, more theories circulated concerning the bishop himself (who was more of a mystery to most Somalis) than July 14. Here are four. One, the bishop was involved in the black market or some other illicit trade and his death was the result of a private quarrel. Two, the bishop was not the actual target; the intended victim was another Catholic who was active in providing information to Western governments and organizations about Somali human rights abuses. Three, Islamic fundamentalists shot the bishop either to make the government look bad or because they disapproved of the bishop's proselytizing or because they were fanatics. Four, the government itself hired a killer to shoot the bishop to make it look as though Islamic fundamentalists had done it. It is this last theory that seemed most credible to Somalis I knew.

Interestingly, the logic directly linking the bishop's death and the attacks on the mosques was never particularly tidy, although people did express wonder about why the government was offering such a large reward for capture of the killer. Apparently it was common knowledge that leading imams and sheikhs had been arrested on the afternoon of July 13 (Thursday). Less clear was whether (a) they had actually been advocating antigovernment demonstrations to follow the Friday noon prayer, as the government claimed (thus leading to their arrest), (b) whether it was the imams who had not been arrested who advocated demonstrations to protest the arrests, (c) whether Siad Barre had gotten wind of rumors of demonstrations and therefore staged his soldiers outside the mosques in anticipation, or (d) whether it was merely disinformation put out by government officials that led people to believe demonstrations were planned, so that potential demonstrators would gather and could be arrested. Additionally, there were conflicting accounts as to what the worshipers *were* planning. It is unclear whether they were shot at as prayers were breaking up or as they were preparing to march. It is hard to imagine the two being distinguishable, since there are only so many doors from which worshipers

could exit the mosques and any resultant outpouring *could* have looked suspicious.

Some of the subsequent world media reports did cite worshipers wielding stones, knives, and sticks. However, even this is a dubious provocation since many Somali men always wear daggers and some Somali men (particularly older men and particularly on Fridays) carry "herding" sticks.

Here it must be noted that there were no journalists in Mogadishu, so despite whatever the BBC or Voice of America may have been told by telephone, there is no conceivable way—given the spread of violence and the lack of physical vantage points—for anyone to have known who was provoking violence where. Nevertheless, a number of journals and periodicals in Britain, the United States, and elsewhere (*News from Africa Watch, Africa Confidential,* and *Indian Ocean Newsletter,* among others) did begin to publish accounts offering more detailed reasons for the outbreak of violence on July 14 (although these certainly were never available to most Somalis, and I only saw them after I had left Somalia). Like the rumors in Mogadishu, though, these written narratives were cobbled together representing much the same range of elements (anger and fear over fundamentalism, proselytizing, revelations of human rights abuses, a business venture having gone awry, etc.), but with names, clan affiliations, and other particulars included: the kinds of details that automatically lend an aura of authenticity.[2]

What is most striking when analyses such as these are compared to one another is not the narrow band of information or circumspect logic they contain, or the clear discrepancies among them, so much as the uniformity of narrative construction; they make sense of a situation that most people in Mogadishu at the time could not make such sense of. In short, they stitch together what may well be correct facts but in so doing omit gaps, as if correlations can always eventually be linked by causal arrows, with the strength of detail then proving causality.

Here already, then, we can glean hints of hindsight at work, noting that no two hindsights about July 14 were identical in any of these accounts.[3] Also we can suggest that while the creation of an apparently substantial narrative out of chronological facts may neaten reality enough to make the description of it *seem* factual, its very tidiness should alert us to the dangers of connecting dates rather than confusions: perhaps the difference between "making" sense and conveying *a* sense.

For residents of Mogadishu, then, July 14 and July 21 came and went. Of the two, July 14 made its mark in certain foreign journals. Because nothing newsworthy happened on July 21, that date was left to be remembered only in Mogadishu, where it was increasingly buried beneath new troubles, difficulties, and worries. Nevertheless, the remembrance of vio-

lence on July 14 in light of nonviolence on July 21 was still a part of discourse, particularly as October 21 approached.

OCTOBER 21: THREE MONTHS LATER

For two decades, October 21 had been celebrated as a national holiday commemorating Siad Barre's accession to power. Every year this anniversary included a parade in Mogadishu designed to display the state-cum-president's martial power. This particular October 21 marked the twentieth anniversary of Siad Barre's rule.

As October 21, 1989, approached, people again began to expect violence. Since the nonviolence of July 21, this was the only date already fixed as momentous, the only date around which people could spontaneously rally. And the symbolic timing was just too perfect: the twentieth anniversary, the government's increasingly desperate search for international support, and worsening economic conditions. But there was also the underlying hope that all Siad Barre really wanted was to enjoy his anniversary celebration and then voluntarily step down.

Siad Barre did not step down. Indeed, the fact that he attended the parade and sat in the reviewing stand was interpreted by some as a sure sign of his defiance and, more disturbing still, of his renewed or renewing strength.

Like July 21, October 21 came and went—another nonviolent letdown that seemed to postpone the significance of July 14. As for the significance of this October 21, it could only (now) be a marker of Siad Barre's longevity as nothing out of the ordinary occurred to otherwise fix it in people's memories.

Given such inflation/deflation of meaning, we begin to see how social memory itself is constructed, with liberal editing between unknowns and constant alteration as people scan forward with expectation and then past with forgetfulness.

FLOWS OUTSIDE OF TIME

To split apart what otherwise might also seem to be an unrealistically neat, chronological narrative, I will pause to examine what else was going on: the praxis of everyday life, supralocal-level interferences, and the variable construction of knowledge, emphasizing that these were all simultaneously occurring and dialectically interlinked yet could never be perceived as such without distanciation in time (itself a distortion).

First, let us briefly consider constraint at the local level. Daily life for many Mogadishu residents was economically circumscribed in at least

three ways. First, there was the constant struggle of daily existence. Second, there were no reliable media in Somalia to report trends or patterns, make predictions, or analyze the local economy for the average citizen. Third, the government, wittingly or not, *was* in control of certain financial levers.

For instance, in the weeks just prior to July 14, cash began to run short in the capital. Clearly, this exacerbated people's frustration with, and anger at, the government. It not only symbolized the regime's corruption and corrosion; such blatant bankruptcy on the part of the government also had to contribute to the sense that it was no longer in control and that even the most basic services were no longer safe from increasing threats of anarchy.

A second wave of cashlessness occurred later in the summer, well after July 14 (although for government employees, there were no salaries for a full eight weeks). This event appeared to have different roots. While a large percentage of Somalia's cash was thought to still be in the hands of nomads (who had been paid massive sums for livestock transshipped to Saudi Arabia for the Hajj in early July),[4] there were also reports that the president was bribing potentially mutinous officers and their troops with large sums of money and that merchants were withholding money from the banks to do their part to bring down the regime. Whether any of these rumors was accurate, or all were accurate in part, there was also evidence that bank officials themselves were partially to blame. In a form of protest over their inadequate pay, clerks and cashiers began demanding 10 percent of any check a client wished to cash or 10 percent of any sum he or she sought to withdraw. However, it also may have been that the government purposely sought to dry up cash reserves to keep people busy searching for money and credit, thereby preventing them from having the time or wherewithal to engage in antigovernment protests.

While this (like so much else) is speculative, there is some indication that the government did occasionally operate in such a manner. For instance, at times there was no electricity in Mogadishu because the generator plant malfunctioned, or because the fuel had been stolen, or because the government ordered the electricity shut off so that people could not congregate at night. There were even rumors that the electricity was deliberately stopped on Wednesday afternoons because this is when the BBC broadcast its Somali report. Alternatively, during prolonged fuel shortages when tensions rose and people who did have fuel found themselves and their vehicles viciously stoned, fuel for the general public would somehow magically rematerialize. It was almost as if the government was playing chicken with the populace; either the regime was exceptionally clever at gauging the local temper and playing the limit or it was continually testing the waters to see how much it could get away with.

Siad Barre's government was best able to achieve such local control and to successfully stage manage an authoritative face by ceaselessly interjecting itself on the international front. This appeared to be done by purposely dealing with countries opposed to each other in quick succession; for example, immediately after Siad Barre would return from Libya his defense minister would visit Kuwait. Such practices were as old as the regime. Similarly, as long as the USSR still supported Ethiopia and the cold war was extant, members of the regime must have felt that they could keep the United States toeing a line of assistance far more often than the United States could successfully coerce them into more than token human rights gestures. At the same time, the more Siad Barre and his government could be seen hosting and being hosted by representatives of other governments on state-controlled television, the more legitimate and powerful the regime (and even Somalia itself) seemed.

Meanwhile, too, there was the conjunction of international finance and finesse at the highest levels—evident in International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) policies that dovetailed suspiciously often with U.S. and even Soviet reactions to the Somali government's latest overtures on the diplomatic front. These multinational agencies, although familiar to many Somalis, were also skilled at publicly masking the real messages they were sending the government, and the Somali state-controlled media could further gloss the rationales the agencies publicized to serve the Somali state's purposes. Thus, the interconnectedness of action, response, and countermeasure at the supralocal level would have been as hidden from most people as the "real" reasons cash was absent or the electricity fitful and fuel spotty at the most local levels.

RUMORS

Still, as with the activity on and around July 14, people consistently sought to rub lemon juice on government actions and pronouncements, to search for real reasons and to conflate conjecture with knowledge. Because knowledge could not be substantiated on the streets, information that came in the form of rumor was often treated as knowledge and, in a sense, became knowledge.

Somalis and expatriates ran parallel rumor mills. Some Americans were officially better informed than others. On occasion there was even cross-pollenization among communities. Certainly one way to enhance standing (of a sort) in the expatriate community was to become a source of information about Somalis. One then became a sort of bank: as with gossip, the rule seemed to be that the more one was able to divulge, the more information one was likely to receive to divulge elsewhere. Networks were key.

not only for the receipt of information but also for the construction and dissemination of reputation. Essentially, then, there was what amounted to an economy of rumors.

However, expatriate acceptance of rumors was quite different from the way Somalis treated rumors. Among expatriates various tricks were used for couching rumors in such a way that they appeared to have originated from significant and important sources. Quite often arguments arose in defense of rumors brought to the table. At times it seemed as though people forgot that, at best, these were only rumors they were discussing; they acted as if rumors were property. At worst, despite this proprietary behavior, everyone always had a pretty good idea who everyone else's sources could be: essentially either office colleagues, government acquaintances, or *boyessas* (cleaning women). Nonetheless, the facade of unimpeachable sources and information was maintained by the use of the third-person plural, the mysterious (numerous) "they."

As for my own random network of Somalis, who were other people's boyessas, drivers, and watchmen; tailors, street vendors, tea shop workers; restaurateurs, civil servants, and young intellectuals, they had already prepared me for confusion. Well before July 14, I had already heard too many different descriptions from Somalis of courtship and marriage—two seemingly straightforward "cultural" matters that always differed significantly in the details, despite anthropological rules—not to wonder whether the piecemeal nature of what I was being told and what I could be told might not also reflect the piecemeal nature of the field for Somalis, too. Therefore, the one pattern that was discernible across the board—namely, variability—seemed to make sense, for me, of Somali reactions to rumors.

In contrast to the expatriates, the Somalis I knew were usually very precise about couching everything they suspected to be rumor *as* rumor and not as "a" (possible) truth or "the" truth. Rather, information was usually offered as the best possible explanation for making sense of a situation according to whatever a person happened to have heard up until that particular moment. Information was never considered unimpeachable or fixed.

On the contrary, information was suspect for at least two reasons: there was no centralized credible news media in Somalia, and far too often the government engaged in the dissemination of disinformation. It was commonly asserted that false rumors were purposely planted as trial balloons, or fake papers were left lying around so that rumors *would* circulate. This was done (it was said) so that the powers that be could gauge public reaction either to something they were planning to do or to whatever they hoped to spoil for opponents or critics.

For instance, in late June a murky set of rumors circulated. These accused northerners in the capital of being witches who fed on other Somalis. Anyone I asked said that these were government-generated rumors.

Why the government was promulgating such notions, though, was less obvious. I heard three divergent explanations: either the government was trying to keep people inside their homes at night to staunch a slowly increasing crime rate, or the government was trying to keep people inside their homes at night to stem the rising tide of antigovernment graffiti and discontent, or the government was trying to keep people housebound to prevent the spread of AIDS.

The kernel of truth that may have spawned two of these explanations was that earlier in June there had been a wave of antigovernment graffiti writing at night on city walls, only to be erased by government workers in the morning. Reportedly even cows that usually wandered the Ceel Gaab market area had been defaced by graffiti. As for the third explanation (which involved AIDS), this too was a subject for speculation since it was widely acknowledged that prostitutes found to be infected with HIV were taken out into the desert and shot.

Even more significant was that most rumors only increased tension as people increasingly tried to determine the roots of the tension assumed to be spawning the rumors. In other words, the search for causes for rumors produced more rumors.

Also, because of the diverse nature of people's experiences, occupations, and networks, what individuals could observe, glean, and piece together varied considerably. People could be incredibly clever in reading meaning into seemingly unconnected events or occurrences. As no information could be disproved, anything was possible. As long as one's logic was internally consistent, one could render any explanation of events believable. Clearly, too, what people already knew predisposed them in various ways. On the one hand, this made for a proliferation of approaches to the same array of "facts." On the other hand, it meant that all "facts" could be threaded together by singular lines of logic.

Consequently, it was this proliferation of rumors along with a desperate need for knowledge that both directly and indirectly led people to continue thinking along certain lines and not others, channeling their logic and creating expectations that, when they were not realized, often blistered into frustration, despair, impotence, rage, and produced and reproduced danger.

It is this residue from rumors that we now know as history. And this may be problematic. For instance, rumors themselves tend to be too slippery and their half-life too short to leave traces in individual, never mind social, memory. Instead, along with kaleidoscopic changes in mood, their significance as mood enhancers or mood dampeners and vectors for action gets swallowed up in concern over the flurry of their results: "events." In turn, as these events become ordered for narrative, the tendency is to reduce, collapse, and edit out the very terror of not-knowing, which is at the heart

and soul of every rumor. Consequently, the critical link—that all events are interpreted by nothing but rumors—gets missed and this terror of not-knowing comes to look hollow and tinny, even peripheral beside the blood, guts, and drama of physical violence.

This is clearly evident the further along the time line we move from July 14, 1989. By late 1992 (a little more than three years later), Black Friday was no longer part of any outsider's explanation for the anarchic unseemliness of Mogadishu.

1992: THREE YEARS LATER

Even at the height of the media blitz, with self-declared experts explaining away the disaster that had become Somalia by December 1992, we find no mention of July 14 as a pivotal date.[5] I suggest this is so for at least three reasons: the immediacy of what needed to be reported, the sources for this reporting—who tended to be journalists new to Somalia (who had not been there in 1989)—and the drowning out of the violence on July 14 in the depths of a broader, more continuous reign of violence.

Also, just as it proved impossible to step outside of July 14 on July 14 in Mogadishu, to analyze it with any dispassion or any sense of context-in-the-making, the constancy of violence since July 14, 1989, has made it virtually impossible to rearrange the local, regional, national, and international flows into a streamlined, sensical narrative. Indeed, the reality itself is such that narrative seems impossible when the beginning is so dependent on an ending that is so unsure.

Having said this, though, it should not be hard to see that for all the same reasons that July 14 did not exist in the foreground of consciousness in 1992 and 1993, it will nonetheless likely reappear and be treated as a historical turning point in the narrative future. This will be so because July 14 has already been documented as a date of importance (by the media immediately after July 14) and consequently has been lent archival stature. Also, when the smoke clears, it will be necessary to search for plausible beginnings to all the violence of 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993. July 14 still stands as the first day of violence in Mogadishu during this period.

In many respects, then, July 14 will reappear correctly, but for potentially wrong reasons. For example, it was not as a date that July 14 had significance on July 14, 15, or even 21. Rather, it held significance as a marker of thresholds and as a moment of confusion that linked all communities in Mogadishu together by threatening to tear all of them apart. Conceivably, the only thing that was clear to everyone about that day on that day is that it was apparent as soon as shots rang out that something momentous and out of the ordinary was happening, so that at the time it *was* felt that this would become The Event that would usher in a series of

other, new events—and a new order. In other words, everyone (Somali and non-Somali alike) realized on July 14 that Somalia was finally in the breech. What marked the breech was that there had been a relatively safe before in contrast to a now-violent present and what was already knowable as a bloodstained after.

Ironically, it is precisely this felt knowledge, this experiential, terrifying, time-warping, never-complete sense of what was happening *then* that history will never record and that future contexts will lack. In part, that will be because history will not be interested in the essence of July 14—confusion, anguish, expectation—and how these emotional responses shook, branded, seared, and altered virtually everyone. But in part, too, this loss will reflect a loss of memory in those present who can no longer be sure how this one day did change their lives, when so many other days of confusion, anguish, expectation, exhaustion, and terror have intervened between an unremarkable then and a no longer remarkable now.

It is also likely that the full range of rumors that constituted knowledge at the time will similarly escape recounting, since they, too, are as evanescent, fleeting, yet cumulative and evaporative as emotion. As a result, history will connect dots of chronology to construct narrative and seek narrative with chronologically probing questions. Yet such a production of hindsight will automatically be checkered. Ultimately, this may also be because it is time, not we, that stretches truths and railroads realities.

Nevertheless, if anthropology can offer any antidote at all to the generalizations of social history, the tailored particulars of political economy, or the momentous occasioning of chronology, it may well be to counter all narrative flows with the confusion of participants' emotions and the observed realities of chaos. For instance, in November 1988, Mogadishu was a safe place for most people although people felt safe expecting violence; by November 1989, Mogadishu felt dangerous because people had not yet settled their differences violently enough. In other words, nothing definitive had happened in the space of that year except that Mogadishu had definitely turned a corner. This was felt at the time—in the tension spawned by rumor and reactions to rumor, in crime, in uncertainty, in heightened expectation. Nevertheless, the proofs for such gut-level knowledge have likely already disappeared. Yet in their wake, and as clues continue to be obliterated, the puzzle still remains: What has Mogadishu turned the corner to? This question will likely always taunt us, because time will always stretch our meanings.

POSTSCRIPT

Time continues to stretch meanings as well as significance. And we continue to rely on rumor.

It is now shortly after a second U.S. withdrawal from Somalia (spring 1994), and all I can say today with assurance is that I again know what it feels like not to really know. Not only have I not been able to return to Somalia but so far, in the first few months after Operation Restore Hope, it is still unclear what, if anything, has been resolved there: whether the supposed chaos, or the violence, or the settling of old-turned-into-new or new-recast-as-old scores.

Indeed, Operation Restore Hope itself spawned an entire industry of rumors outside of Somalia; one can only imagine the intensity of these rumors within Somalia. For instance, many of us here (Somali and non-Somali alike) have had to wonder, why *was* the United States leading the charge back into Somalia? Clearly—according to one logic—it had to be because Somalia had something the world still found valuable: oil, geostrategic significance, something. Otherwise, why help starving Somalis when there were starving Sudanese, Angolans, Mozambicans, and even Americans who could equally have used assistance?

Interestingly, even U.S. soldiers stationed in Somalia agreed: humanitarianism could not be the real reason they had been sent so many time zones away. When I posed this question to 10th Mountain Division infantrymen (during a visit to Fort Drum in July 1993), their response often came close to responses I heard from Somalis living in the United States: the intervention had to be politically motivated. Of course, the political intricacies the soldiers saw were somewhat different from those that Somalis in this country tended to focus on.

While some soldiers cited a newspaper article[6] describing Somalia's potential oil fields, as well as then-President George Bush's close ties to the oil industry, and agreed that this must have been the real reason their units had been sent, others assumed that the United States needed a military base in Somalia, which this intervention would secure. What is significant about this last conjecture is that it reveals the partiality of knowledge about Somalia even when there was a surfeit of sources to indicate otherwise. These soldiers were clearly unaware that the United States *had* been interested in Somalia from the late 1970s onward, in part *because* there was an extant base the United States "purchased" access to (namely, Berbera). Berbera had since become superseded as a jumping-off point for U.S. soldiers bound for the Middle East, and this, too, should have been common knowledge in Somalia—if not through the military itself, then through the now-ubiquitous Western media.

However, that soldiers were not so well informed even about what they could/should have known suggests something else about rumors and conjecture: how easily these can substitute for factual information and then preclude the need to search for actual fact. It also suggests something else, about how often people scan for the future in the present, rather than the past.

For instance, another American musing was that Operation Restore Hope was President Bush's way of leaving incoming President Bill Clinton with a quagmire. Alternatively, there were Americans as well as many Somalis who assumed that Operation Restore Hope had been engaged in to preempt Islamic fundamentalists from gaining a stronghold in Somalia. Indeed, Somali rumors were well elaborated on this score, centering in part around the machinations of UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who (it was said) still had strong ties to the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, which, some Somalis believed, had its own (if not just antifundamentalist) interests at stake.

Nor is this at all an exhaustive survey of the rumors that swirled around, resulted from, and perhaps even helped lead to Operation Restore Hope. Rather, it is merely a sampling of how rumor worked to try to fathom the why-fors of a very well publicized yet ultimately very confusing intervention.

Ironically, the confusion may stem in part from the fact that the intervention was advertised as humanitarian. Whether or not we take the declared aims of Operation Restore Hope (to feed the starving) at face value, we still have to recognize that humanitarian ends were sought through a whole array of suspect means: closed-door politics, U.S. soldier–Somali segregation, the use of force. All of which was bound to fracture coherence among Somalis, between Somalis and Americans, and between Somalis and the UN. No wonder suspicion and rumor resulted. Given so much secretiveness, how could there not be hidden agendas?

Meanwhile, once rumor became a substitute for—and suspicion replaced—knowledge, clarity was bound to dissipate. As was certainty. With vengeance.

NOTES

1. Major political demonstrations in Mogadishu had been reported most recently in October 1988 (*Africa Confidential*, 18 November) and August 1987 (*Africa Research Bulletin*, 15 October). However, the most recent violent demonstrations had occurred in 1975, when Muslim leaders led opposition to Siad Barre's declaration of Family Law.

2. In their July 21 issue, *News from Africa Watch* wrote,

> The killing [of the bishop] is thought by many in Mogadishu to have been carried out by two members of the President's own clan, the Marehan, leading to resentment about the apparent attempt to implicate Moslem religious figures. According to the reports we have received, when the authorities learned of these rumors, they publicized a six million shilling reward for information leading to the identity of the assas-

sin, both to quash the rumors and to create the impression abroad that the government was determined to apprehend and prosecute the offenders. . . . They also began a campaign that identified religious elements as the guilty parties on the basis that many of them are "fanatic fundamentalists" who had openly attacked the government's offer of a substantial reward for the killing of the Bishop. (6)

Africa Confidential, in contrast, explained in its July 28 issue that the bishop was shot in his cathedral on 9 July. The government offered a reward of 5 million Somali Shillings, which led to criticism that it was larger than anything ever offered as a reward for the arrest of the murderer of any Muslim. Rumors were spread that the bishop, best known for his help with refugees and for recovering bodies from the NSS [National Security Service] when families were too frightened, had been trying to convert unemployed Muslim youth. (7)

The Somali novelist Nruddin Farah added the detail that many Somalis believed the bishop had buried unclaimed corpses without the proper Islamic rites, in effect "converting" them to Christianity after death (*Manchester Guardian*, 18 August 1989).

Interestingly, six months after Black Friday, there was a completely different spin on the bishop's assassination in *Africa Events*, which suggested that the murder was carried out by a member of the NSS at the instigation of one Issa Ugas, the head of a shoe factory in Mogadishu and a close relative of the president's. Issa Ugas had allegedly received the shoe factory, confiscated from the Vatican, when the Somali government nationalized Somalia's industries. Shortly before the bishop's murder, *Africa Events* reports, rumors indicated that the IMF and World Bank were going to force the privatization of small industries and that the Catholic Mission had displayed interest in regaining their factory, thus the bishop was shot (January 1990).

Finally, one and a half years after Black Friday, a Somali writer in *New African* asserted that Siad Barre had long been suspicious of the bishop for being too knowledgeable about human rights abuses and the inner workings of the regime. It was after Amnesty International's June 1989 visit to Mogadishu that Siad Barre had the bishop eliminated—shortly after the bishop also protested the president's authorizing of a family member to take over a plot of land belonging to the church (February 1991).

3. See note 2, above.

4. Prior to the annual Hajj, Somalis usually transshipped millions of head of stock to Saudi Arabia from Berbera and other northern Somali ports. However, with civil war raging in the north, much of the Hajj transshipment took place through Mogadishu and included unprecedented numbers of stock from the central parts of the country.

5. Either in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, or a variety of news magazine accounts—or for that matter in CNN or network news commentary or analysis.

6. In fact, a front-page story from the *Los Angeles Times*, 18 January 1993.

ACCIDENTAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The Morning after the Massacre, Beijing, June 4, 1989
(Photo: Collection Chinese People's Movement 1989, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam)