



Max-Planck-Institut für ethnologische Forschung Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

Conference

Continuity and change in Somali society, politics, and economy in the *longue durée*

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Outline:

Over the course of the past decades, Somali society has undergone a number of dramatic social, political, and economic transformations. Most prominently, Somalia started out as the first state in post-colonial Africa to establish a democratic transition of power (in 1967) and, subsequently, became one of Africa's "well established" dictatorships and then a paradigmatic "failed state". This, in turn, has given rise to a range of further political transformations in light of massive military interventions and the evolution of alternative forms of political order. The economic alterations in Somalia have been no less significant. After relying on a subsistence economy based on pastoral-nomadism and agro-pastoralism at the end of the 19th century, Somalia developed an export-oriented economy during colonialism, followed by a state-controlled economy during the period of socialist dictatorship. After the collapse of the dictatorship in 1991, Somalia turned to some degree into a "duty free" shop while also experiencing the revival of traditional economic structures *cum* integration into regional and global markets that frequently crossed the boundaries between the formal and informal economy. The social structures of Somalis living not only in Somalia, but also elsewhere in the Horn of Africa or the wider diaspora have also experienced various changes. In particular, these changes include the transition from a predominantly rural into a largely urban society with one of the highest urbanization rates in Africa. The wide spread access to internet and private schools facilitated new forms of formal education. To a certain extent this goes hand in hand with changes in the kind(s) of Islam practiced in Somalia. While Sufism was once predominant, Islamic practices among Somalis have expanded to include of other interpretations of Islam, such as Salafism and Wahabism, and Sufism itself has undergone changes. All of this has important social implications. The transformation in both education and Islam, together with the long-term effects of protracted fighting (with many men being maimed or killed in battle) and flight (with women finding new positions for themselves back home and in the diaspora) has had a transformative impact on gender roles in Somali society. Many women have acquired a level of independence and economic and political influence that would not have been possible in the past.

In spite of the plethora of transformations, certain continuities in Somali society can be observed. Trust is very often still invested in relations of kinship (not only represented by patrilineal descent, but also by various ties established through the mother's line or through marriage), and is ordinarily the basis for conducting business, politics, and social matters. Likewise, larger international investments and international aid or humanitarian projects frequently have to rely on local strongmen or gatekeepers in a situation reminiscent of the *abaan*-system of pre-colonial days, when caravans and travelers through Somali territories had to acquire protection from local clansmen. Moreover, despite substantial external and private investments, Somalia remains one of the poorest countries in the world overall with very low levels of economic development. This dependence on foreign aid and investment

made Somalia vulnerable to Cold War politics and continues to make it vulnerable to foreign interventions, both military and political. It also encourages the persistence of a political “class” that thrives on extraversion.

Perspectives on Somali society (for the past thirty years, and partly even longer, if one takes the *shifto*-rhetoric into account) have been dominated by (external) agendas focusing on security. The ubiquitous buzzwords are “state collapse”, “state-building”, “piracy”, and “terrorism”. This conference proposes taking a broader approach and exploring a larger variety of “classical” topics in sociology, social anthropology, human geography, and political science. Rather than confining the analytical perspective to significant evolutions of the past decade or so, we suggest focusing on the *longue durée* along the lines of French historian Ferdinand Braudel and the adaptation of his perspective by the French Africanist Jean-François Bayart.

This conference looks at continuity and change with regard to Islam, gender roles, economy, education, social stratification/minority groups, and politics in Somali society – both in Somalia and beyond, taking the wider region and global diaspora into account. We invite both established and emerging researchers to reflect on the topics outlined in this abstract in empirically rich and well-theorized papers on one of the following general topics: Islam, gender, the economy, politics, social change. We welcome papers looking into local or national dynamics as well as ones focusing on international and transnational connections.