MAKING MEMORIES OF MOGADISHU IN SOMALI POETRY
ABOUT THE CIVIL WAR

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What is dearest to us is often dearer than the truth

History is the poisoned well, seeping into the groundwater. It’s not the unknown past we’re doomed to repeat, but the past we know. Every recorded event is a brick of potential, of precedent, thrown into the future.

– Ann Michaels, Fugitive pieces

Introduction

An incident

The power of Somali poetry was brought home to me at a conference of Somali Studies in London in 1993. A European expert on Somali poetry, who had collaborated with a noted Somali poet, stepped onto the podium to analyse some recent Somali poetry commenting on the current clan-based violence with all the venom and partiality of the moment. As soon as he recited the lines in Somali, a deadening silence fell over the large auditorium. Because this was London, a centre for Somali immigrants and refugees, there was a sizable Somali audience, from old men to young girls with neat hijabs, who had so far been engaged and animated. Now they became uneasy and quiet, and although the speaker, somewhat nonplussed and unnerved, completed his talk, the eerie atmosphere made it difficult to concentrate on what he said. When he finished, a whole orchestra of voices swept over him: how could he bring these kinds of texts into a public place. They had come here to learn something scholarly, not to be insulted and humiliated. They had come as Somalis and had not come prepared to be addressed and insulted like this. And however strongly the speaker explained that these lines were only illustrations for his analysis, his defence fell on deaf ears.¹

The first point that this incident impressed upon me was the power of Somali poetry. Spoken before a Somali audience, the power of these lines as effective speech, in this case their virulence, as it were, could not be contained or bracketed by scholarly analysis; on the contrary, pronounced by a European scholar, its virulence might become even more dangerous. However, had the lines not referred to clan violence, their impact might have been different. The second insight that emerged was therefore about the emotive power of speech dealing with violence and about the relationship of Somali collective identities to space. Many Somalis in the audience were angry that, in this scholarly and public place, shared with other Somalis and non-Somalis, they were confronted with words that targeted their clan identity. Thus they suddenly found themselves differentially related both to the words spoken, and to the speaker and the people around them. Rightly or wrongly, they insisted that, in that particular context, their common identity as Somalis – their national identity – was the only relevant and appropriate one and that the speaker was out of line to address and construct them differently. The incident represents some of the themes of this chapter in condensed form, namely how Somali popular culture, that is to say Somali poetry, performed or disseminated in public (shared) space, mediates violence, that is to say, interprets, speaks about, and aims at intervening in violence.

This essay examines a particular set of Somali poems, namely texts that discursively use Mogadishu, the capital city of the independent Republic of Somalia since 1960, to mediate the violence of state collapse and reconstruction. Before turning to these specific texts, however, it is necessary to provide some background to the wider set of sources to which they belong and the violence with which they deal.

The violence

There are two shifts in the discourses about violence that are at the centre of this analysis and Mogadishu plays a significant role in both of them. The first one is a ‘key shift’ whose destructive impact materialised in Mogadishu at the moment of state collapse in January 1991. It was a ‘key shift’ in the sense that it was a key or cumulative moment at which a particular kind of discourse – what I call ‘the clan logic’ – was

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