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Ciabbari, Luca

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Ciabbari, L. (2008). Productivity of refugee camps: social and political dynamics from Somaliland-Ethiopia border (1988-2001). *Afrika Spectrum*, 43(1), 67-90. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-355212>

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Luca Ciabbarri

Productivity of refugee camps: social and political dynamics from the Somaliland-Ethiopia border (1988–2001)¹

Summary

Refugee camps are not simply places where temporary protection and primary assistance are provided, but also places in which political and social production occurs. In areas such as the Horn of Africa, with a long tradition of international interventions in the form of humanitarian aid, refugee camps have been intrinsically embedded within local social and political power structures and dynamics, which have deeply transformed both their aims and actions. The purpose of this article is to analyse such transformations as part of a local social history, in particular under the peculiar condition of state collapse which characterised Somaliland in the early 1990s. Furthermore, I wish to show how – in the course of interlaced institutional collapse, war and international interventions – new equilibriums and forms of government have emerged, thus contributing to the depiction of a kind of genealogy of the new public realm in Somaliland, composed of various actors standing beside the state.

Keywords

Refugee camps, humanitarian aid, appropriation, state-building, post-conflict, Somaliland

Like many areas in the Horn of Africa, the north-western region of Somaliland² is a place with a long tradition of international interventions in the form of humanitarian aid.

1 The writing of this article has followed a long trajectory: earlier versions were presented and discussed at the 2004 Aegis summer school in Cortona, Italy; at the 2005 Aegis London conference (panel 'Governance beyond the State: legitimate authority in major cities and refugee camps' directed by A. Mehler); and at Bayreuth University, 2005 Ethnologisches Kolloquium. I am grateful to all the participants in such meetings for their precious comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank Mr. Ray Ball as well as two anonymous referees for their initial help. Fieldwork in Somaliland was conducted in 2003 during my PhD research, funded by Milano-Bicocca University, Italy, and again in 2005.

2 Somaliland is a new state – though one without international recognition – which originated from the collapse of the ex-Somali state in 1991. What I have here called the north-western region includes the Awdal and Hargeisa regions, previously part of the Somalia Republic and now part of Somaliland. On political developments see Ciabbarri, forthcoming.

Over the last 30 years, the area has experienced a series of political and social upheavals, one after the other, resulting in the continual displacement of the civil population. These upheavals include the severe drought of 1974/75 and the 1977/78 Ogaden war as well as later civil strife, which started in the north in 1988 but had been preceded by ongoing tension throughout the 1980s.

Alongside the conflicts and population movements, the relief interventions accompanying these events, and continuing long after each individual emergency diminished, themselves became factors which shaped the social landscape of the region and indeed became part of it.

Humanitarian interventions have become intrinsically embedded within local social and political power structures and dynamics, which have deeply transformed both the aims and actions of these interventions.

The recent history of northern Somalia has been closely connected with and influenced by the presence of refugee camps in the region. As reported by many scholars in various African contexts,³ refugee camps are not simply places where temporary protection and primary assistance are provided, but are also places in which political and social production occurs. As far as northern Somalia is concerned, this has entailed, for instance, the strengthening of new political and military movements, the emergence of new social identities and authorities, and the renewal of connections with the original refugees' areas, leading to the formation of local accumulation processes and new local orders.

In this article I will focus on this kind of social and political production by considering the series of camps established along the Somaliland-Ethiopia border from 1988 to 2001. My purpose is to emphasise the manifold relationships – corresponding to a sort of 'unintended productivity'⁴ and amidst a general situation of war and social suffering – which developed between the refugee camps and the surrounding social context.

Humanitarian aid embedded: the production of local histories

Ten years after the placement of camps within Somalia that originated from the 1977/78 Ethiopia-Somalia war, which sheltered Somali-ethnic Ethiopians, new camps were established in Ethiopia from 1988 onwards, just across the border from Somalia. These were to host the Somali population fleeing the civil strife which had erupted in the northern region between the local opposition movement (SNM – Somali National Movement) and the central gov-

3 See Allen/Morsink 1994 and Allen 1996; Bascom 1998, Hammond 2004, Malkki 1995.

4 In using the term 'productivity', I'm following studies such as 'Anthropology in the Margins of the State', cf. Das & Poole, 2004, in particular the contribution of J. Roitman.

ernment.⁵ The camps became one of the reference points for the reorganisation of the rebellion after the government's counteroffensive, thus leading to the development of new institutions. Afterwards, in correspondence with the central state collapse in 1991, such Ethiopian camps witnessed the development of social and economic networks which, drawing on international aid assistance, significantly contributed to the economic rehabilitation and political stabilisation of the whole northern region.⁶ The experience of massive displacement and regrouping into camps had set in motion a dynamic process of societal transformation, with far-reaching consequences. Furthermore, on the political level, the camps played a part in promoting the material construction and consolidation of the new Somaliland state and its de facto recognition as a political subject vis-à-vis international actors.

As such, these dynamics appear to be an example of transboundary politics, with refugee camps representing transboundary formations (Callaghy et al. 2001) that have strongly contributed to the creation of a new social and political landscape in post-conflict northern Somalia. Such politics, beyond the state and born in the refugee camps in a time of institutional collapse, drew on the advantage of the safety provided by crossing the border and on the resources distributed by international relief organisations.

However, it was only after a transformation brought about by local actors that these resources became effective on the ground. Thus, this article describes such transformations. The appropriation of aid – what I have called the 'local consumption of humanitarian aid' – is in fact the pivotal element in comprehending the kinds of effects that refugee camps have had on local history. The social homogeneity which characterises both sides of the border – in Ethiopia and Somalia – and constitutes what has been called a unique 'frontier-area' (Djama 1995) was the crucial factor permitting such transboundary politics.

Location (border areas), history (the stratifications of relief interventions shaping a sort of 'humanitarian memory'), and the immediate situation (civil strife, then state collapse) constitute the conditions for the local embedding of humanitarian aid. By focusing on this embedding and by considering the long-term stratification of relief in the area, I set out a twofold purpose:

- 1) to analyse the contributions of external interventions to local dynamics as well as their transformation and localisation. Humanitarian aid and refugee camps appear here as a constitutive factor in local processes and are part of the local social and political history (Ranger 1994);

5 For a general overview see Lewis 2002.

6 In 1991 there were nine camps in north-east Ethiopia hosting Somali people: Hartasheikh A, Hartasheikh B, Rabasso, Camaboker, Daror, Teferi Ber, Darwanaje, Kebe Beyah and Aisha (plus one camp, Hol Hol, in Djibouti territory). At that time the general population was estimated to be approximately 600,000 – the real number far less. On the issue see Ambroso 2002.

- 2) to provide some insights on the manner in which – in the course of interlaced institutional collapse, wars, and international interventions – new equilibriums and forms of government have emerged.

When the study of refugee camps is connected to the broader context wherein they are located, refugees themselves come into view as actual social actors (see Allen/Morsink 1994, Allen 1996), thus contradicting the image of passivity commonly attached to them.⁷ The vivacity and resilience of local contexts with respect to external and planned interventions – under particular conditions that I will try to elucidate – remind us not to overvalue the concrete effectiveness of the policies of control and discipline carried out by both national states and international organisations. With regard to the African context, the point has been raised, for instance, by Latham, who calls attention to the limits of external interventions and to their vulnerability: ‘their presence affects that local context, but does not order it’ (2001: 86).

In an attempt to highlight the historical trajectory followed by relief interventions in the area, I will primarily take into account the Ogaden camps, established in Somalia as a consequence of the war with Ethiopia. These constitute a sort of prologue to subsequent events: the dynamics involved, strongly controlled by the Somali state, were in fact later replicated and adapted by non-institutional actors such as rebellion movements and refugees themselves. The second and third sections will then deal with the Ethiopian camps: from 1988 to 1991 as ‘civil war camps’ and then from 1991 onward as ‘state collapse camps’. The first two sections are mostly based on the available scientific literature and provide a quite schematic description of the events involved. In the third section I analyse more extensively the case of Darwanaje Camp, drawing basically upon my own fieldwork and thus restricting my examination to a limited area. Finally, I will come back to some general remarks related to the political legacies and provide some conclusions.

A prologue: the Ogaden camps (1978–1988)

The new refugee camps built from 1988 on inside Ethiopia mirrored earlier camps on the other side of the border. These original camps were the direct result of the 1977/78 war, during which Somalia and Ethiopia had fought over the Ogaden territory, a region inhabited by Somalis but actually within

⁷ Taking such a specific standpoint of course entails passing over other aspects related to the topic. While the relationship between aid agencies and refugees has been widely analysed (cf. Harrel Bond 1992, 1995, 1999, Hyndmann 2000), I would like to stress that my attention to the macro social consequences of relief interventions on the regional scale does not imply overlooking the personal suffering and harsh living conditions of those sheltered in the camps. For such topics see for instance Declich 2001, Farah N. 2000, Farah Ah.Y. 1996.

Ethiopia. North-western Somaliland was deeply involved in this Ogaden war (1977-78), being located near the major front line close to the disputed towns of Jijjiga and Dire Dawa, and was therefore deeply affected by the subsequent refugees' invasion. The original camps survived until 1990/91, when both the Ethiopian and the Somali regimes collapsed. During their twelve years of existence, these camps were incorporated within the political machine of the Somali state and were, according to Lewis (2002: 247), 'frozen'. In the aftermath of the military defeat and amidst the consequent political and economic crisis, they were transformed into political hostages in the government's struggle to gain funding from international organisations, the level of funding being dependent on the number of refugees. The National Refugee Council (NRC), a newly established state agency created to tackle the refugee emergency, became an immensely powerful bureaucratic body and the generator of public and private wealth and of political careers:

Under its extraordinary Commissioner ..., the NRC built up an impressive empire which viewed demographic enquiry with grave suspicion ... [within] a refugee relief economy. The actual number of refugees qualifying for this support thus soon became a lively issue (Lewis, 2002: 247-48).

The tough disputes over the refugee numbers fought between the Somali government on the one hand and UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and international donors on the other have become a classic example in the special literature on refugee studies. Scholars have written extensively on this issue (cf. Harrell-Bond et al. 1992, Kibreab 1993, 2004, Hyndmann 2000, Zitelmann 1989), reporting on both the negotiations between the institutions involved and the practical recounting attempts.⁸

As reported by Kibreab (2004), who in a recent article accurately summarises the whole subject, the size of the contribution of humanitarian aid to the national economy at that time appears rather impressive and reveals as well the magnitude of the crisis which followed the military defeat:

Because the donors complied with the inflated refugee figures, the trade in refugee commodities soon became the largest industry in Somalia, increasing the country's GNP by an estimated 40 per cent in 1980. The relief effort also generated an enormous amount of employment and economic activity (Tucker 1982: 23, quoted in Kibreab 2004: 4).⁹

⁸ Incidentally, it was exactly through such experiences that the Somalis gained the label of 'difficult population' within the developmental and humanitarian world (cf. Kibreab 2003, Hyndmann 2000).

⁹ The author also emphasises how 'up to 75 per cent of the relief aid was stolen before reaching the refugees in the camps' and that 'in spite of the fact that the supply of food was abundant (...) many refugee groups were left to starve' (ib.).

Food aid was diverted to the market or for the maintenance of public agencies, namely the army (Ghalib 1995: 147 ff.). What is relevant for the purpose of this article is that the implemented mechanism of diversion of aid resources implied the direct involvement and connivance of the refugees and the local population. Practically, increasing the statistics meant increasing the level of aid brought to the country, particularly in the form of food rations. Correspondingly, this meant distributing more ration cards to refugees than what was normally due and enlarging family size. Moreover, as a result of these political manoeuvres, refugee status and the accompanying ration card were also easily attained by existing local groups, and were exchanged locally. For many neighbouring rural groups (semi-nomadic agro-pastoralists) this became part of their livelihood strategy (Djama 1995, Farah 1996b). Though such practices were usually linked to camp officials' strategies for controlling the reselling of food aid or its relocation to other unofficial recipients – thereby tying the refugees within a general patronage and dependency system – the whole mechanism somehow became beneficial for the latter also. The positive effects for the local economy appeared obvious, and it was clear that the crucial point for the function of the overall structure was the manipulation of statistics and ration cards. From this, a general consensus to hamper any attempt to find out the genuine numbers emerged. Kibreab describes how such a consensus was produced by the government officials in particular, who forged a wide-ranging alliance 'encompassing all the political forces from top to bottom: from the national leadership, regional and district authorities, NRC officials to refugees' (2004: 5 – Zitelmann 1989 provides a vivid account of the operation of such a system and its complexity).

When focusing on the genealogies of humanitarian aid in the region, the transformation of a relief intervention into a sort of government enterprise invites two kinds of comparison. If compared to the past, this behaviour contrasts remarkably with that officially adopted by the same government during the 1974/75 drought, which was characterised by an emphasis on the idea of national autonomy and promptness in meeting the needs of the population (cf. Lewis 1975)¹⁰. Such business-like activity¹¹ also contrasts deeply with the subsequent transformation of the refugee camps into places

10 Of course, by and large such an emphasis was simply official rhetoric. Furthermore, the rescue operations involved political goals as well, namely, the encapsulation of the displaced nomads within projects of sedentarisation and the construction of state cooperatives. The issue entails diverse elements, and behind national pride, the USSR was providing substantial aid; my point is just to mark a difference between the two relief interventions, in a process where such interventions became the contested *locus* for a growing visibility and a more demanding interference of international actors, though one variously manipulated by local actors.

11 However, as carefully shown by Kibreab (1993), the external representation of everyday life in these camps continuously emphasised an image of passivity attached to refugees.

of war and violence, particularly in the north at the end of the 1980s, when the favouritism which characterised the distribution of aid resources combined with the lines of political exclusion and division.

The refugee camps became part of the consensus machine of the central government in a second respect also. They were indeed instrumental in reformulating the alliance of the regime with the Ogaden clans and in maintaining these clans' support of state power after the government's defeat in the war and the retreat of the Somali army, in which such groups had played a prominent role. From this point of view, these refugee camps were used not only to give protection to the Ogaden population living in Ethiopia and exposed to the Ethiopian army's retaliation, but also to convert some of the ex-combatants directly into refugees (Prunier 1997: 394), thus partially solving the problem of demobilisation. Through humanitarian aid new resources were distributed, and their management was largely entrusted to the Ogaden elites. The patronage system wherein they were encapsulated saw the partial substitution of a public agency, the army, with another, the relief bureaucracy within the NRC. This created tensions, particularly in the north. Here Ogaden refugees were given job opportunities at the Berbera port or reserved pastoral areas and water points for the recovery of their pastoral activities, thus creating tense competition with the local Isaaq pastoral groups¹². At the same time, young refugees within the camps were recruited by the national army and utilised in the repressive campaign against SNM and its supporting clans, chiefly the Isaaq. These factors further fuelled the conflict in the north, and throughout the 1980s the camps in this area became profoundly involved in the general confrontation, as targets of various attacks by SNM and its supporters (Africa Watch 1990, Gersony 1989).

1988–1991: the northern civil war camps

Between 1988 and 1991 the struggle in the north between the SNM and the central government escalated into civil war. As the SNM tried to take control of the main northern cities, the government reacted with force, bombing the main towns (cf. Africa Watch, 1990). As a result, the consequent flight of the civil population from the urban centres (Hargeysa, Burco, Gabiley) led to the

12 It is not my intention to 'ethnicise' the problem of refugees in the north: surely, for the most part, the refugees coming from Ethiopia belonged to the Ogaden clan, though not exclusively, and of course not all the Ogamens were part of the regime's patronage system or benefited from it. The ethnicisation of the problem in the north is partly the result of the civil strife and of the modes in which it has been fought. The refugee problem was part of this construction, though it also derived from and exploited a long antecedent tradition of animosity between the two groups (cf. Markakis 1989, Askar 1992).

creation of a series of refugee camps just inside Ethiopia, along the border with northern Somalia.

As the regime utilised the Ogaden camps as bases for the recruitment of new soldiers in the civil strife, the SNM attempted the same in the camps in Ethiopia, although with a notable difference. While in the Ogaden camps recruitment was forced, in the new camps it was voluntary, though it took place within a setting of extreme difficulty. Besides the harsh living conditions, the newly established camps were in fact attentively monitored by Siad Barre's emissaries (Farah 1996), transforming them into a space of tense political confrontation. Notwithstanding this, the hosted population also provided economic support to the struggle by handing part of their food rations over to the SNM.

The escalation of the conflict, the heavy repression enforced by the Somali army, and the flight of the civil population across the border into Ethiopia transformed the fight into a popular rebellion (Compagnon 1992), which had its centre in the safe areas just across the Ethiopian border and, consequently, in the refugee camps. The SNM organisational and military structure was at that time strongly weakened by the government offensive but was replaced by a new informal organisation centred on tribal councils led by the lineage leaders. It was no longer a military structure led by an external leadership, but was rather a structure strictly linked to the territory and more clearly organised and directed along tribal lines. Such councils, which later became a permanent and institutionalised forum, held a fundamental value insofar as they inaugurated a mode of governance that marked the whole of the 1990s and became the basis for the foundation of the new political order after the fall of the dictatorship. In the process, the long local tradition of informal politics was formalised and finally institutionalised into the Guurti, the upper chamber according to the Somaliland Constitution. The evolution of the political order drew on experiences which dated back to the colonial era (Compagnon 1993: 18-19) and which continued even during the dictatorship period, partly induced by Barre's rule and partly stemming from the autonomous local trajectory of the eldership. The first national tribal leaders' assembly was actually held in 1988 in a far-off spot along the border, thus confirming the effectiveness of the transboundary tactics.

As a political tool for both the government and the opposition, the two initial phases of the refugee camps greatly influenced the following events. Such early phases formed a model which shaped the dynamics of the new camps. The old camps left a particular heritage which comprised a sort of 'collective humanitarian memory': a complex body of knowledge relating to behavioural models of interaction and appropriation of aid assistance, and practical examples of how to use it within local dynamics.

Previous experiences and memories of humanitarian aid contributed to shaping the relationship between the new camps, the locality, and the humanitarian regime under the new conditions of state collapse.

1991–2001: the state collapse camps – the case of the Darwanaje refugee camp¹³

After the Siad Barre regime fell in January 1991, fighting continued for several weeks between the SNM and local militias within areas which had previously been government strongholds. This meant the establishment of more refugee camps further west (Teferi Ber, Darwanaje, Aisha), at a time of complete institutional collapse and social instability.

Later, an agreement among the various forces and groups on the ground in the whole north-western region of Somalia was reached, thus laying the foundations for the formation of the new Somaliland state, which declared itself independent from the rest of Somalia in May 1991.¹⁴ However, such a fragile initial pacification was not enough to effect the return of the refugees. On the contrary, a totally novel situation opened up for all of the Ethiopian camps along the Somaliland border – the old ones created in 1988 and the new ones as well. A general setting characterised by precarious socio-economic conditions and no immediate expectation of political stability marked the subsequent events. The refugee camps remained and, in fact, became much more than a shelter against violence; indeed, they formed a shelter against social collapse. As such, they took on a very peculiar role in the history of the newly founded Somaliland.

a) Capturing humanitarian aid: the formation of the Darwanaje camp

Darwanaje refugee camp is typical of this new phase. Situated on the border between north-eastern Ethiopia and the most western part of Somaliland, the camp was created in 1991 and closed only in 2001, following a series of repa-

13 This section is based on fieldwork I carried out in Borama town in 2003 and later in summer 2005 among the returnees from Darwanaje refugee camp. For this reason I have chosen to describe here in detail the economics of humanitarian aid consumption, which in many respects replicates the economics of the previous generations of camps. In this section, by considering a single case, I also restrict my examination to a particular region of Somaliland: the Awdal region. Interviews – single persons and groups – were conducted, particularly in the suburb of Xaaslehda: for full details see my PhD thesis 'Ordine/Disordine – Politiche della ricomposizione sociale nella regione di Borama, Somaliland, 1993–2003' Università di Milano-Bicocca, a.a. 2004–05.

14 Cf. Lewis 2002 for a description of the events.

triation exercises instrumented by UNHCR from 1997 on. It mainly collected groups fleeing from the region of Awdal, in particular the town of Borama.

Initially perceived by the refugees as a form of insurance against uncertainty, Darwanaje later became one of the pillars of the Awdal region's economic recovery. Eventually it would no longer be an emergency camp, but rather a camp that blurred with the local social and economic environment. At the first sign of this change, the local people established strategies in order to capture, in a fashion, the camp by way of manipulation and infiltration during the registration process. This produced multiple and exaggerated ration cards for each family group. After the chaotic flight across the border and as Ethiopian authorities started to gather the groups at specific points, it was not difficult for both genuine refugees and local people who had quite simply 'joined the queue' during the registration to take advantage of the initial confusion and get more than one ration card and/or cards indicating a higher number of family members than existed in reality. These practices, common to other refugee contexts (cf. Harrell-Bond et al. 1992, Harrell-Bond 1999)¹⁵ and typical of previous local relief experiences, clearly explain why the number of refugees in the official statistics, once again, by far exceeded the reality.¹⁶ In one way, these tactics represented the popular version of the Siad Barre political model of refugee camps management, now spontaneous and self-managed. The peculiar conjunction provided by institutional collapse on both sides of the border (the end of the Barre regime in January 1991 was followed by the end of the Mengistu regime in Ethiopia in May) led to the reopening of the border itself, and the whole setting – with regard to the relationship of the new camp with the surrounding context – resembled the first generation of Somali camps. The open border permitted the reconstitution of a unique regional area.

Once again, camp location played an important role in shaping the nature of these dynamics. Darwanaje Camp was in fact situated in Ethiopia, just across the border from Somalia and only about 15 km from Borama, the capital of the Awdal region, where most of the refugees came from. Furthermore, this area of Ethiopia and the Borama region are inhabited by Somali groups from the same clans. The people on both sides of the border share language and genealogy, both instrumental in distinguishing personal identity.

15 To be precise, as Kibreab remarks: 'manipulation of refugee statistics is widely practiced by countries of origin, host governments, donor states, humanitarian organizations, and refugee population' (Kibreab 2004: 9).

16 As a 'purely' state collapse camp, Darwanaje – according to Ambroso, who served as repatriation officer for UNHCR in Somaliland during those years, cf. Ambroso 2002 – had a lower number of genuine refugees compared to the camps that originated during the civil strife (30 percent of the total population as opposed to 50 percent for the civil war camps).

Economic and social networks linked this peripheral area to Borama town.¹⁷ Right from the outset, relationships between the camp and the town involved an intricate network, established through the earlier processes of urbanisation where the links between rural and urban settings had remained unbroken. In this respect, the camp represented the last stage of the history of the frontier region, which has been marked by various strategies for crossing the border and taking advantage of it alternated with periods where the border was closed and highly patrolled. The practice of smuggling, a fine calculation of the reciprocal advantages found on the two sides of the border as well as a complex body of local knowledge on how to cross it and take advantage of its opportunities, are an integral element of such a history (cf. Djama 1995, Ranger 1994). The creation of camps during the ongoing flight incorporated these networks, and camps were clearly distinguishable on a tribal basis.

Thus, Darwanaje, like Teferi Ber/Aw Barre, became a Gadabursi camp.¹⁸ Local patterns of social organisation, more meaningful and influential, overlapped and intertwined with the organisation of the humanitarian regime and helped to determine internal camp dynamics. An additional element to consider is the practice of semi-nomadism associated with agro-pastoral activities, common to this area around Borama, mobility being a further complicating factor faced by outside relief agencies in the classification of local social groups.

Location, memories, and situation affected once more the real shape of the camp and transformed its *raison d'être*: from emergency camp to shelter against political and social collapse, and deeply embedded in social networks connecting the camp to its surroundings.

b) Distribution and redistribution of relief items

As scholars have widely documented (Allen 1996, Christensen 1986, Harrell-Bond/Voutira 1995, Kibreab 1993, 2004, Piguët 1998), the development of a parallel market alongside the 'official distribution', in which the goods delivered by the relief agencies are resold and turned into something else, is a common phenomenon in refugee camp situations.

This is the product first of several general factors: the inadequacy of the food ration to meet the whole spectrum of the basic needs; the concentration of a given number of people in the same place (in 1994 the camp hosted approximately 40,000 people – the initial number of officially registered refugees was around 115,000: Ambroso, 2002), a fact that in itself attracted the lo-

17 As well as to the Ethiopian side of the border, particularly the town of Jigjiga, where the UNHCR officials were established – cf. Farah Ah.Y. 1996b.

18 Gadabursi being the major descent group in the Awdal region. On the contrary, the civil war camps were mainly populated with Isaaq.

cal traders; and the heavy impact of the humanitarian machine on the local situation in terms of the quantity of resources displayed.

In Darwanaje further specific factors added to this: the surplus of food rations delivered, because of the manipulation of refugee numbers; the pre-existing social networks linking the refugees and the people living in the area adjacent to the camp, and the proximity of their place of origin; the historical background characterised by uncertainty and negative expectations; a sort of know-how on how to interact with international agencies based on past experiences; and poor control on the part of the Ethiopian state over the crossing of the boundary and entry to the camp. Under these conditions, the parallel economy of reselling, recycling and transforming, carried out directly by the refugees, became the central feature of Darwanaje life.

As a result, the camp and Borama town became part of a unique economic system. The working relationship between humanitarian aid and local dynamics, through a sort of multiplier effect, produced several consequences, on the economic level as well as the social and political levels, as will be shown.

In the informal refugee economic activity, goods delivered by aid assistance were considered by the refugees as a resource and not simply the finished article ready to be used. Within the dynamics of everyday life, both within the camp and outside it, goods received took on a different purpose and began to circulate in ways that were not intended by the donors. Goods were adapted and utilised according to local needs. Furthermore, they took on a different significance. This applied firstly to refugee status recognition. To get more than one card and to exaggerate the number of family members was in fact the first way to appropriate the aid.

The second mode of appropriation was the resale of food. This was to become the main resource. The major exchange networks were all organised around it. Food resale became a very specialised activity. It involved small and poor families that resold a part of their ration in order to get other primary needs (such as clothes, or food not included in the basic ration), but it also involved those utilising a strategy of accumulation with a view to the investment of any profit into new small trading activities as well as the 'professional' wholesalers operating in regional food markets outside the camp. The latter were usually backed by commercial networks led by people from Borama or Ethiopia.

Even secondary elements of the aid machine were recycled, for instance packaging materials: the bags were sewn together to become roofing material for the huts and were sold in the market. Later on, building on this first-phase income, new work activities could be started: for example, small shops selling clothes, shoes, tea, and *kat* were opened. Town traders, attracted by the new opportunities, also established their shops on the edges of the camp. As business increased, more new activities appeared, including small restaurants and hotels. The humanitarian organisations working in the camp also

provided opportunities for new businesses, offering jobs within the structures they were building, such as schools or health centres, or during the distribution process.

When it became clear that the camp was becoming a business centre, resources from outside began to appear as well: loans procured by the kinship group or by newly established local business networks as well as income received from relatives outside the camp or even from those working abroad. Horst (2006) has emphasised how the refugee camp is only one of the places in which the kinship group is located, within a framework of continuous cooperation and exchange. According to the author, the years following the fall of the Barre regime saw a real boom of Somali companies specialising in money transfers. While Horst describes such expansion in the south, referring to the refugee camps located in northern Kenya, the same can be said for northern Somalia: it was there that today's largest money transfer and telephone company made its first transactions in the Ethiopian refugee camps (personal information; cf. also Marchal 1996). The dislocation of the families in the camps or abroad, which has constituted the primary forced strategy adopted by the Somalis in the face of state collapse, goes together with the need to maintain links and contacts.

In addition, the resettlement programmes set up by UNHCR, as well as the self-managed migration projects carried out by the refugees on the grounds of the status accorded to them by UNHCR, have further multiplied the creation of a Somali diaspora across the world (cf. Farah, 2000).

c) Local space reorganisation and social networks

Through all the above activities a complete transformation of the nature of the camp occurred. The new shops, the circulation of goods, the movement of people, can be viewed as contributing factors in the socialisation of the place, replacing the artificial establishment of the camp in an area which was previously a small Ethiopian military camp controlling the boundary. In fact, it became much like a Somali town or, indeed, actually became one. It was essentially a big market and – as it was reported to me – a booming area capable of attracting people and investment from Borama town, making it a focus for the economic recovery of the whole region.¹⁹

The camp, at the beginning a sort of foreign body with respect to the region, became an integral part of the local dynamics in a very short time. Because of the camp's linguistic and genealogical proximity to the local community and the social networks linking it to neighbouring areas and the town, lo-

¹⁹ Material proof of this was given by the wide distribution of wheat grains – a typical food aid item, since local and imported staples are normally sorghum, wheat flour, or rice – in regional markets (both Somaliland and Ethiopia): cf. Farah Ah.Y. 1996b.

cal people forced it to be an active open space. It became an important centre for the agro-pastoral groups living around it, but most of all it formed a direct link with the town of Borama. Communication with the city, previously taking the form of a track used by the local pastoral people, became intense, with cars and trucks coming and going everyday, so much so that in Borama someone started to call the new road the 'Highway Darwanaje'.²⁰

The crucial point in the appropriation of humanitarian aid has been its transfer from the humanitarian framework to local informal networks. What has typically followed was that the local 'humanitarian entrepreneurs' activated already existing social networks in which transactions and exchanges were based on a set of familiar, tribal, and friendship types of relationships. Thus, the appropriation of humanitarian aid was immediately accompanied by reinvestment and redistribution. Through this networking activity, people, resources, and goods were linked. As such, they could circulate within local social spheres characterised by specific behavioural codes well known to everybody, more suitable to the social environment, and within which people were much more confident than in the more formal exchanges with aid agencies. Often described as fraud, cheating, illegal acts, or marginal phenomena to be deterred, these practices were, from a local point of view, precisely what made the aid really effective. It is precisely the connection between aid and local networks and circuits that made the Darwanaje camp pivotal to everyday life in Borama throughout the 1990s.²¹

d) Social production

Using de Certeau's definition of consumption (1980), we can call this appropriation activity 'the local consumption of humanitarian aid'. De Certeau defines consumption as an astute and widespread activity, which gets everywhere, silent and almost unnoticed, and whose actions are not characterised by 'taking initiative' but rather by 'ways of using' the products created by the dominant economic order. De Certeau uses this idea in order to describe the practices of the common man within a social environment dominated by an 'instrumental rationality'. This would suggest a similarity with a refugee camp situation, given that the means of the humanitarian organisation are charac-

20 Whereas I describe here the unique relationship between Darwanaje and Borama town, the same dynamics can be described for the other camps, in particular Hartasheikh. Within a short time it became the business centre for the Hargeisa region, very much connected with the capital Hargeisa on the Somaliland side and Jigjiga on the Ethiopian one. Similar developments were also recorded in northern Kenya, cf. Montclos et al. 2000.

21 And it is the representation that disconnects the camp from the surrounding social environment which makes such labels plausible and current. The rhetoric of the dependency syndrome (Kibreab 1993) is always ready to step in as soon as such a disconnection occurs.

terised by an action of 'instrumental rationality': the need to acquire information, to count, and to plan in order to deliver the goods. The refugees' answers and actions typically reflect such a system: to obscure deliberately (the counting, the inquiries about family composition, etc.), to manipulate (the official definitions, the goods delivered, the labels attached to them), and to gain access (within the humanitarian machine in order to take advantage). The relationship is marked by conflict and mistrust: refugees' consumption appears like a siege, a battle, subversion, and clashes with the humanitarian institution's wish for absolute control.²² Such a production of mistrust, and the tense relationship which actually constitutes a typical trait of aid dynamics in the region, is one of the effects of the peculiar bond built up between external aid and local dynamics over time.

The consumption of humanitarian aid, however, as I mentioned, entails many more levels and differentiations than the simple local/external divide. Farah (1996) clearly described the various hierarchies existing within the Teferi Ber camp, located approximately 30 km east of Darwanaje, and showed how the distribution of items was internally regulated according to local rules rather than the formal procedures of aid organisations.

Additionally, another part of such hierarchies appears particularly evident when the broader camp-town system and the strategies utilised by the refugees to leave the camp are taken into account. Such dynamics clearly illustrate the transformations in the territory and social relationships that first the dislocation and later the relief intervention induce.

As I stressed earlier, the strategies of the local populace produced the development of an integral town-camp system. This not only involved economic exchanges and the redistribution of relief items outside the camps but also conveyed a social dimension in a broader sense. Such an aspect was marked by two distinct features. First, what might be described as 'task sharing': in correspondence with the political agreement with SNM and the Somaliland declaration of independence in May 1991, people in a good economic and political position were the first to return to town, partly to defend their possessions but also to play a role in the peace-making process and work on the construction of a new order. At the same time, those less favoured continued to 'invest' in the camp, meanwhile maintaining relationships – based, for instance, on kinship ties (and implying both solidarity and hierarchy) – with the town and its occupants.

The second feature displays a strategy of interdependence. It might mean, for example, an individual deciding to leave his family in the camp and to find

22 Also in this case, UNHCR recounting exercises, conducted in collaboration with the Ethiopian army, have taken on the role of symbolising such confrontations. On this point see the descriptions given by Ambroso 2002.

a job outside, either in town or elsewhere; to leave the weakest members of the family in the camp; or to stay in the camp only in more difficult times.

When UNHCR started repatriation exercises in 1996/97, many people had thus already left the camp, either definitively or by playing the interdependence tactic. Those who remained until the last period were really the worst off, in terms of economic resources as well as contacts and social relationships which could have given them support. This was the case, for instance, of a family originally from a small village located further west of Borama, close to the border with Djibouti. The solution they deployed, after UNHCR had quite literally pushed them out of the camp, was to 'occupy' a plot of land in Borama which belonged to a rich clansman, whom, however, they did not know directly. They subsequently went to him and, trying to mobilise the kinship connection and claiming that the respective forefathers knew each other, asked for permission to stay there. The result of such an intrusive practice was that the rich man included the family within his personal network of clients and offered them some jobs in the various businesses he had in town. This was possible because he had the means to take advantage of this self-inclusion, enlarging his social ties and strengthening his position within the lineage by showing that he could fulfil the duty of solidarity and mutual help. In other cases, regarding less wealthy groups, such invasive strategies produced tensions within the extended family or the lineage. The manner in which the survival strategies of those in the lower levels of the society matched the larger social circuits, particularly clan and lineages, was thus extremely complex. Social networks were crossed by opposite drives, either towards a reformulation of internal hierarchies, producing broader social cleavages, or toward an emphasis on internal cooperation, though on the narrower basis of extended family or neighbourhood relationships. Groups and modes of social interaction were redesigned in this way. Claims of mutual collaboration and solidarity could hide non-symmetrical relations and social distance; collaboration often stemmed from intrusion tactics or strategies of co-optation rather than from reciprocity.

A final effect of the strict integration of the camps and the urban centres – referring not only to the link between Darwanaje and Borama, but also to other cases such as Hartasheikh and Hargeisa – has been the move to town after the camps were progressively closed. The example mentioned above also corresponds to an urbanisation process. Like the family in the case just described, a great number of people who lived in rural areas or in small villages before being displaced went to the big regional centres upon the closure of the camps. Towns were in fact perceived as safer places to move to, where it could also be easier to restart a living and find opportunities. There are no statistics to illustrate such a phenomenon, but many case studies collected during the fieldwork in the new Borama suburbs strongly substantiate the relevance of this process. The move to town from the camps was accom-

panied by similar migration from the countryside and returns from abroad. These two moves are still continuing, and urbanisation now represents a major phenomenon in Somaliland, itself conveying different changes. Undoubtedly, refugee camps contributed significantly to such a dynamics.

While in the early 1990s the refugee camps were the receiving centre for remittances from abroad, later the major towns started to play this role. The continuous flow of money from the Diaspora has actually constituted a huge source of support for the revival of the urban centres and their massive growth (cf. Ahmed, 2000). But what I would like to highlight once again is the deep interconnection between the camps' experience and subsequent social dynamics: the camps fuelled the dispersal of the Somalilanders into different communities scattered across the world, and they were also the place where big money transfer or communications companies were born. Moreover, the same extensive entrepreneurial spirit which emerged in the camps now characterises the urban landscape (cf. Marchal, 1996).

Political legacies

The previous example stresses once again the specific contribution of the camps to local social dynamics, as part of the 1990s local social history. Moving across the various facets of aid appropriation, I will now briefly draw attention to its upper levels and the institutions built up locally in order to manage the relief intervention. The significance of such an aspect has to be examined while considering the whole line of refugee camps placed along the border. As in the past, for the new Somaliland state, the refugee issue became, in fact, a national one.

As was the case with the Ogaden camps, where the administrative institution for refugee affairs (NRC) became a powerful bureaucratic body within the Somali state, in the new Somaliland government the related ministry, the Ministry of Resettlement, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction (MRRR), acquired a similar centrality. It was actually the only ministry that did not change its guidance during the first years of the new Somaliland state, and it was the primary interlocutor with international actors when the camps' management in Ethiopia started to plan, in 1994, a repatriation programme. It operated in close conjunction with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Planning. The three ministries, popularly known as 'the line', represented the bulk of the state in the early 1990s – together with the Ministry of Finance, which controlled the revenues from the Berbera port – insofar

as they were collecting and managing most of the financial resources.²³ They were actually the sole offices provided with full budget capacity. It was precisely the interface with external organisations that conferred on them such a position.²⁴ The relationship served as a foundation in a double sense: the resources obtained through humanitarian aid (for instance, in terms of refugee repatriation projects, infrastructure such as building or vehicles) constituted for the government one of the few material tools available in a context of general international isolation and lack of recognition. At the same time, as a symbolic resource, this same interface provided legitimacy and a kind of informal recognition to the new political subject vis-à-vis international organisations and neighbouring countries, in particular Ethiopia. Even now the three ministries are located in the same compound, thus also signalling spatially the integrated functions of the exterior-oriented institutions.

Such a trajectory of course leaves a legacy and constructs one of the core dynamics of the new state institutions, reproducing the model of extraversion typical, as elsewhere, of the former Somali experience. An emphasis on 'institution building' has accompanied the entire collaboration of external organisations with local Somaliland institutions. This means the development of a class of aid workers and bureaucrats situated at the interface between the state and international agencies who can cultivate a typical ethos related to the public realm and an expertise concerning administration, bureaucracy, or technical matters. In other cases such an expertise drifts towards practices where the consumption tactics and mistrust typical of refugee camps interactions are reproduced. At the interface between the diverse elements which constitute the new public realm, the dynamics of manipulation and appropriation appear in fact as a typical feature. This recalls the notion of *métis* evoked by Bayart in order to describe a sort of 'structure of interaction', a type of relationship with external actors widespread on the contemporary African social and political scene. *Métis* is distinctive to relationships based on a certain degree of power disparity as well as cultural distance, and it is associated with social situations involving intermediaries and activities of mediation. In such a fashion, it covers, for instance, the 'net-

23 The main resource was actually represented by the port of Berbera and its custom revenues drawn from the export trade, particularly the livestock exports to Saudi Arabia. It was President Ciigal, elected during the 1993 Borama conference, who was able to assure such a flow of resources (cf. Lewis 2002), thus stabilising the new political entity.

24 This representation partly contrasts, though it does not contradict, the common view of Somaliland as a 'self-made state' which could count exclusively on its own resources. This is true, and to a certain extent this entrenchment with aid resources represents a meagre substitution for official loans accorded by international institutions and not available to a non-recognised country; however, in order to depict a kind of genealogy of the new public realm in Somaliland, composed of various actors standing beside the state (cf. Ciabbarri, in Bellagamba & Klute, forthcoming), it is important to include such a trajectory.

works of influence and clientelism which constitute the post-colonial state' (Bayart et al. 1999: 47). What is interesting about *métis* from my perspective is its all-encompassing feature – it involves, at the same time, state institutions and bureaucrats, middlemen who trade food items, and simple refugees – since it resembles the connivance built up in the Ogaden camps between Somali officials and refugees.²⁵ My point, however, is not to merge different behaviours attached to very different social actors: *métis* practices are very different from one another, and each level of aid consumption implies a large degree of autonomy. Nevertheless, such resonances linking the top and bottom of the society are likely to express a kind of 'structure of consensus' by which the elites may try, at times, to acquire legitimacy or to justify self-conducted practices of mismanagement of public resources to the general population. The relationship between power and population is not only determined by a hierarchical system, but also by a kind of intimacy (Herzfeld 1997).

Conclusions

What I have tried to do is to show the different ways in which, through humanitarian aid, a specific social space, economic circuits, and social relations have been produced. This production has been made possible by means of the localisation of external intervention, transforming aid into a local fact of life. Thus, as an example, for the Awdal region, and particularly for Borama town, the Darwanaje camp represented a pivotal element in its social history in the 1990s. Only by including such an element is it possible to understand how the population has successfully tackled the novel condition of state collapse and managed to restart their lives. The progressive transformation of the Ethiopian camps, which made them very much resemble a town and a big market, corresponded to an equal transformation outside the camps, within Somaliland. As noted, the traumatic experience of displacement and regrouping set in motion a complex process of transformation of the society, with far-reaching consequences.

It is now possible to briefly summarise such consequences. Humanitarian aid had first of all an economic impact, becoming the major constitutive factor for local markets, as the wide distribution of food aid grains demonstrates (this also involved a change in the nutrition regime, making the rural population in particular more dependent on imported foodstuff). Moreover, it revitalised the urban markets and led to the establishment of connections

25 To be clear: *métis* does not necessarily mean trickery or corruption but rather the need for local actors to find a way around the rules in interactions with external actors or the impossibility of telling the whole truth as far as the goals and methods of project implementation are concerned.

with regional as well as international markets. This involved all levels of business, from petty traders to actors operating in international markets, and interested traditional actors as well as new ones. A new entrepreneurial 'activism' was developed, which still constitutes a distinctive aspect of urban life today. Big companies specialising in money transfer and telecommunications also made their start within the camps. In sum, the general effect was the restarting of the local economy and a contribution to the social stabilisation of the region.

On the social level, however, the change also entailed a push for the huge urbanisation process which followed, as well as an active role for the camps in fuelling the migration abroad, a process which is still in motion. The local consumption of humanitarian aid permitted this set of unintended transformations. The major focus of this article was thus the dynamics of such a makeover and the main activities involved, first of all the resale of food. From this activity, as a sort of multiplier effect, further developments and reinvestments could emerge.

In part, the new dynamics could rely on past experiences and local memories related to relief operations. Amidst the differences, I have tried to highlight the continuities that characterised the various generations of camps which followed one another over time, starting from the Ogaden camps located within Somali territory. Only such continuities can explain the specific strength and complexity of the entwinement of local contexts and humanitarian aid.

The original situation, however, has also produced new processes: from a broad perspective, under state collapse the external intervention also accompanied the reconstitution of state structures. In such a way, the repatriation projects have represented a partial though important constituent of the new Somaliland state, both in a material sense and in terms of the reproduction of a structure of interaction typical of the camps experience.

The intermingling with international actors, however, has gone even further, and such dynamics testify also to a new kind of state building, where some of the state's traditional prerogatives and functions are openly taken over by international organisations. Following a path which started with the repatriation programmes and the rehabilitation of state structures, such a handing over of state functions is now continuing in sectors such as health and education (cf. Brons 2001) or in projects which range from capacity building to enhancing the awareness of human rights.

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Zusammenfassung

Flüchtlingslager sind nicht nur Orte, wo vorübergehender Schutz und erste humanitäre Hilfe angeboten werden, sondern auch Orte, an denen politische und soziale Produktion stattfindet. In Regionen wie dem Horn von Afrika mit einer langen Tradition an internationalen Interventionen in Form von humanitärer Hilfe waren Flüchtlingslager untrennbar eingebettet in lokale und soziale politische Machtstrukturen und Dynamiken, die sowohl ihre Ziele als auch ihre Aktionen transformierten. Das Ziel dieses Artikels ist es, solche Transformationen unter Berücksichtigung der besonderen Bedingungen des Staatszerfalls als Teil einer lokalen sozialen Geschichte zu analysieren, der Somaliland in den frühen 1990ern kennzeichnete. Des Weiteren möchte ich zeigen, wie in der Verflechtung von institutionellem Verfall, Kriegen und internationalen Interventionen neue Gleichgewichte und Regierungsformen entstanden, die eine Art Genealogie des neuen öffentlichen Bereichs darstellen, der sich aus verschiedenen Akteuren, die neben dem Staat bestehen, zusammensetzt.

Schlüsselwörter

Flüchtlingslager, humanitäre Hilfe, Aneignung, Staatenbildung, post-conflict, Somaliland

Résumé

Les camps de réfugiés ne sont pas seulement des lieux qui offrent une protection temporaire et une première aide humanitaire, mais également des lieux où prend place une production sociale et politique. Dans les régions comme celle de la corne de l'Afrique qui ont une longue tradition d'interventions internationales sous forme d'aide humanitaire, les camps de réfugiés ont toujours été intrinsèquement partie prenante dans les structures et dynamiques locales du pouvoir socio-politique qui ont profondément transformé leurs buts et leurs actions. Dans cet article, l'objectif est d'analyser ces transformations comme une partie de l'histoire sociale locale en prenant particulièrement en compte le contexte de délabrement de l'Etat qui caractérise le Somaliland au début des années 1990. En outre, je souhaiterais essayer de montrer comment, dans l'entrelacs du délitement institutionnel, des guerres et des interventions internationales, de nouveaux équilibres et de nouvelles formes de gouvernement ont émergé. Cet article veut con-

tribuer ainsi à une sorte de généalogie du nouveau domaine public du Somaliland auquel participent à côté de l'Etat, de nombreux acteurs.

Mots clés

Camp de réfugiés, l'aide humanitaire, appropriation, construction étatique, post-conflit, Somaliland

Luca Ciabbari, PhD, is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Max Planck Institute in Halle/Saale (Germany).