

# The Italoophone Somali Diaspora and Social Change in Somalia

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## **The Italoophone Somali Diaspora and Social Change in Somalia.**

*Education, Communication, and Institutions of Social Control.*

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Michele Gonnelli

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## Abstract

This research project is about social change, and major hindrances to it, in Somalia. Drawing from Somali studies, migration/diaspora studies, and development communication, Somali diaspora members are proposed here as new (old) social change agents. The underpinning question is how they frame, promote, and communicate social change in their home country. Within this (ex) diaspora, those with an *Italophone* background could make up, I argue, a distinguished sub-group: the Italophone Somali diaspora, which is a major finding in itself. They are educated, at least in relative terms compared to the majority of their contemporaries, they are Italophone (among others), and they have been inspired by a modernization ideal. After addressing characteristics and background of this particular group of people, I explore their voices about social change and the main challenges they are confronted with. I first define, as rooted in the accounts of my interviewees (permanent and transitory diaspora members, returnees), the current main actors in the Somali social arena. These pertain to the so-called *outer world*, a notion that I put forward for the purpose of this research. Yet, the real battle for social change, I posit, is fought at the level of the *inner world*: the world of thoughts, beliefs, hopes, and fears. At this level, three main social institutions regulate Somali society: clan, tradition, and Islam. (Overlapping) rules and normative codes derive from these institutions, which embody forms of *social or mass control*. Within this understanding, and from an Italophone Somali diaspora perspective, social change is conceived as the lessening of the pervasive social control associated with these institutions. The impact of these forces, and especially of the new *religious code* in force, is far-reaching, resulting in a pervasive state of fear and widespread self-censorship that are full of implications for communication for social change. Within this framework, I then discuss the role that the Italophone Somali diaspora sub-group assigns to three (potential) vectors of social change. First, the Somali Diaspora as a whole, with its distinctive *social change capital*, as I call it. This is a form of socio-cultural capital, with a proactive potential, that works as a source of inspiration for promoting social change. Second, development communication as a vector of social change in itself, and as pursued in practice by the members of the Italophone Somali diaspora. Messages and strategies of their “civic engagement” in Somalia are analysed with respect to the constraints deriving from the main social institutions. Third, education in its broad sense, which plays a paramount role in shaping the mindset and the socio-cultural capital of the Italophone Somali diaspora, in explaining current forms of communication for social change, and in constituting, in their eyes, the ultimate source of any possible social change in Somalia today.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

*La Somalia non è un'isola dei Caraibi*, “Somalia is not an island in the Caribbean” reads the title in Italian of the book by Pietro Petrucci (ed.) and Mohamed Aden Sheikh that appeared in 2010. Across the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, the former used to be the main expert, journalist, and gatekeeper, from an Italian perspective, about Somalia. From a civil – as opposed to military - point of view, the latter can be considered instead as one of the main mentors and designers of the Somali revolution of 1969, also known as *Scientific Socialism*. I was working at the *Scuola Superiore Sant’Anna*, when I first bumped into this book, in Rome, in the Griot bookshop in Trastevere. Back then I was responsible for a periodical called the *International Commentary*. Every issue was meant to tackle a different country or context from a conflict management and development perspective. After Colombia, Yemen, Iran, Libya, and Sudan, it was the turn of Somalia. I knew where to place Somalia on the geographical map – not in the Caribbean! - but my understanding of the context and of the people was basic and distorted by mainstreaming crisis-oriented readings. They left very little room for individual and social profiles, and the interlacing of personal stories with History (with the capital letter) across two countries such as Somalia and Italy: the colonised and the former coloniser. My ideas followed the conventional understanding associated with the events of the civil war of the early 1990s, the media coverage back then, and some distorting (visual) accounts: the Somali, a population of nomads, pirates, bandits and warmongers, Somalia the deadliest and most unsafe country on earth.

Luckily enough, I picked the invitation that the book in question offered. I then started a journey that continues to this very day; it led me to embark on a proper research project, and prepared me for future ones to come. The way I began to frame my understanding of Somalia drew from those interlocutors I could reach out to. Not having been a direct eye witness of past or present Somalia, I had to rely on other people’s narratives and re-construction of the events that preceded and followed the outbreak of the civil war in 1991, for they represent the inevitable lenses through which those directly affected make sense of the situation today. I happened to come into contact with, on the one hand, members of the Somali Diaspora in Italy and in Europe, and, on the other hand, with *survivors* of the past Italian engagement within the country. An involvement that almost without interruption lasted well beyond the period of the *Amministrazione Fiduciaria Italiana* (1950 – 1960), and

controversially continued for the entire period of the military regime of Siad Barre, to come to an end only after 1991. Afterwards, the interplay between the consequences of the civil war in Somalia, the new world geopolitical order of the post-Berlin Wall era, and Italian internal politics, eclipsed Somalia completely from the academic and the socio-political debate in Italy. In particular, the advent of the Second Republic and the political earthquake represented by a new judicial direction, known as *Mani Pulite* (“Clean Hands”), swept away the old protagonists of that “special relationship” - as the political elites used to refer to it - which linked Italy to the Somalia of Siad Barre. From an Italian perspective Somalia was left, more than ever, in the shadows, in a corner. From there, only occasionally the media lifted the country intermittently, with coverage of the atrocities of the civil war, failed peace conferences, and other *war* chronicles<sup>1</sup> (such as: weapons trade, nuclear waste dumping off the coasts of Somalia, piracy, the killing of Ilaria Alpi and Miran Hrovatin,<sup>2</sup> military interventions, advent of the Islamic Courts, the establishment of the Transitional and then of the Federal Government, Al-Shabaab, and so on).

As a result, Somalia and a generation of State actors, employees, and managers, from both countries, fell into oblivion. They almost disappeared from the public sphere.<sup>3</sup> Through this process, as we say in Italian, “venne gettato il bambino con l’acqua sporca”, the baby was thrown out with the bath water. The entire Italian development cooperation sector, the *longa manus* of the Italian Foreign Affairs, fell under the strict scrutiny of the judiciary, due to prevalent corruption. At the same time, Somalia sank into clan cleansing, widespread predation, internal and moral displacement. This meant that also the less compromised actors of the Somali chapter, from both countries, were invested by a blow of discredit that swept over everybody.

Against this backdrop, also at scholarly level and again from an Italian perspective, Somalia remained almost unattended. Of course there were notorious exceptions to this, those traditionally revolving around the Italian historiography and linguistic schools on Somalia: Gian Paolo Calchi Novati, Angelo Del Boca, Irma Taddia, among the former, Giorgio Banti, Annarita Puglielli, Abdhalla Omar Mansur among the latter. However, in the post 1990s era only a few epigones dared to approach

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<sup>1</sup> As opposed to “peace journalism”. See Johan Galtung’s works and initiatives for an overview.

<sup>2</sup> On 20 March 1994, Ilaria Alpi and Miran Hrovatin were killed in an ambush on their jeep in Mogadishu by a seven-man commando unit after returning from Bosaso. At the time of the murder, they were following a case of weapon and illegal toxic waste trafficking in Somalia.

<sup>3</sup> Interviews, among others, with key informants such as Antonio Cappelli (Professor of Epidemiology at the Somali National University in the period 1973-1990), and Antar Marincola, Somali-Italian writer and author of, together with Wu Ming 2, *Timira, Romanzo Meticcio* (Einaudi 2012).

Somalia as a subject and with renewed interest. Only around the 2010s and with a gap of almost 20 years, a new pool of Italian scholars engaged with Somalia from different angles.<sup>4</sup> However, apart from the historiographic dominant perspective, they never represented a systematic and continued contribution to the field of Somali Studies. And above all, only in a few cases, this knowledge was produced in English.

This general situation, at scholarly and political level, was further challenged by another trend that went hand in hand with the advent of globalization. If the Italian academic attention dropped altogether, at least for quite a few years, at international level the *hegemony of English*, to which local academic productions in Italy were exposed more than ever, confined those contributions to limited international audiences, making any possible translation economically unviable. The language barrier represented, inevitably, another hurdle to the diffusion of those studies, which only rarely made it outside the Italian borders.

These two processes, I claim, had a huge impact on the *production of knowledge*, to quote a recent debate in the Somali Studies,<sup>5</sup> from a Somali Italian point of view. But also well beyond the mere academic realm, a huge heritage in terms of experience, human resources, proximity, and (*mis*)understanding, was never to be really benefitted from. Proof of this is that long list of authors, often completely unknown to the average contemporary Somali researcher, who, especially in the immediate aftermath of the Italian direct engagement, when distant observation superseded direct involvement, produced a vast non-scholarly literature.<sup>6</sup> This literature, although of different quality, remains relevant, I argue, for helping us to frame the Somalia of yesterday, which in turn explains a good deal of the Somalia today. I am referring more in particular to Petrucci's *Mogadiscio* (1993), Aden & Petrucci's *Arrivederci a Mogadiscio* (1991, 1994), Sica's *Operazione Somalia* (1994), Pacifico's *Somalia Ricordi di un Mal d'Africa Italiano* (1996), Arecchi's *Somalia e Benadir* (2001), Aden & Petrucci's *La Somalia non è un'isola dei Caraibi* (2010), Cappelli's *Somalia Il Sangue e l'Incenso* (2011). Or, digging up the past, to Pestalozza's *Somalia, Cronaca della Rivoluzione* (1973) and Tutino's *Viaggio in Somalia* (1975), just to mention a few. But the list could continue at length to include press articles, analyses, biographies, and

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<sup>4</sup> Among these Cristina Ali Farah, Federica Borgagna, Luca Ciabbari, Valeria Deplano, Matteo Guglielmo, Petra Mezzetti, Antonio Morone, Michele Pandolfo, Valeria Saggiomo.

<sup>5</sup> The debate goes under the name *Cadaan Studies*. More details below.

<sup>6</sup> An exception is represented by Kapteijns (2013), in her book she draws from both Pacifico's and Sica's accounts, directly in Italian though.

projects.<sup>7</sup> Not to mention all those publications that were (and are) born at the crossroads between Italy and Somalia, from that generation of Somali Italian authors, such as Cristina Ali Farah, Igiaba Scego, Kaha Mohamed Aden, and Antar Marincola. They all write in Italian.

This is to say, I claim, that there is a huge amount of knowledge that was produced in the Italian language and has remained confined within language borders. Another recent example are the diaries of the father of the Somali State (for some of the Somali nation too) Aden Abdullah Osman (Aden Adde), that were recently (autumn 2017) donated by his sons to the Italian *Centro di Studi Somali*.<sup>8</sup> They span a huge period, between 1955 and 2005, the entire history of post-WWII Somalia. And they were kept in Italian, the language with which he learned to write, for the period 1955-1972. Disregarding this patrimony altogether would result in a great loss and waste of (re)sources, ultimately of knowledge. Many reasons back this: the intricacies and sometimes the intimacy of the Somali-Italian relationship during those years, the fact that the personal biographies of this generation of Somalis (and Italians) are intertwined with the national history of both countries, the role played by education (and language skills) in all of this, while shaping the mind (the “*captive*” mind?)<sup>9</sup> and the commitment of many.<sup>10</sup>

It is against this backdrop that the present work has to be placed, with respect more in general to the Anglophone production and the general debate on Somali knowledge production promoted by *Cadaan Studies*.<sup>11</sup> Unquestionably the Anglo-American world, or just *-phone*, produces by and large the greatest amount of research work on Somalia. Various universities in the UK and US have their own department of Somali Studies. Funding and scholarships are often also sustained by the large Somali communities in those countries. The same applies to the Scandinavian countries, which, by default,

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<sup>7</sup> See, among the less known, the writings or the initiatives of Gianni Mauro (Manager for the Somali National University), Ernesto Milanese (Professor at the Somali National University), Giorgio Giacomelli (Ambassador in Somalia), Giovanni Ferrero (Ambassador, and diplomatic representative in Somalia), Pino Fasano (Professor at the Somali National University), and Augusto Chiaia (Development Cooperation Practitioner), to mention just a few.

<sup>8</sup> *Il Centro di Studi Somali*, or *Centro di Ricerca Interdipartimentale di Studi Somali (CSS)* - the Centre for Somali Studies, is the prosecution of the research group *Ricerca di Studi Somali*, which was set up at the end of the 70s. Ever since, in collaboration first with the Somali National University and the Somali National Academy of Arts and Sciences, and independently afterwards, the centre has carried out research mainly in the linguistic and cultural field.

<sup>9</sup> A reference to Bulhan’s work (1980) “The Captive Intelligentsia of Somalia”.

<sup>10</sup> As discussed more in detail in Chapter 4, the Italian presence and influence in Somalia revolved primarily around education. Notably around: the formal education sector – primary and secondary schools - as set up during the AFIS; the policy of scholarships for the period 1950-1990; and the Somali National University (1973-1991), to whose establishment, from the Italian side, Ambassador Giorgio Giacomelli, Professor Paride Stefanini, and Professor Gianni Sampietro substantially contributed.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of the debate, which was hosted also at the 12<sup>th</sup> SSIA Congress in Helsinki, see Cassanelli’s “Reflections on the 12<sup>th</sup> SSIA Congress” (2016), as well *Journal of Somali Studies*, Volume 3, Issue 1-2, June 2016, including “Inaugurating Cadaan Studies” by Moahmed A. Eno.

often resort to English as their main language of output. Second generation Diaspora Somalis are among the most promising leading scholars in these centres for their proven commitment towards their homeland, also in light of their language skills – eventually both in Somali and in the vehicular language – and for the privileged access and observation point they have on their research subjects.

Within this context, in the last 10-15 years, a good deal of the research produced in these centres has predominantly focussed on Somaliland, with a strong emphasis on its state and peace-building processes. (British) Somaliland used to be traditionally Anglophone, besides being Somali and Arabic (more transversally). On the one hand, language proximity and fluid transnational diasporic bonds contribute, I believe, to a renewed research and political interest between this part of Somalia and the English-speaking world. A certain cultural tie with the ex-homeland first, and the largest diaspora communities based both in UK and USA, play a role, I suppose.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, mostly for security reasons, Somaliland has represented a viable option for conducting field research compared to the extreme volatility of South Central Somalia.<sup>13</sup>

The conversation that became popular under the hash tag (#) *Cadaan Studies*, on power, authority and knowledge production in Somali Studies, fits into this general discussion. Many scholars, particularly in 2015 and 2016, expressed their views, sometimes not without some animosity, about who is in control of this knowledge and with what results. The question revolves around how much *white* – Cadaan means white - hegemonic power, colonial, and neo-colonial mindsets (if not prejudices) are epistemologically reflected in the subjects of investigations, in the research questions, in the way things are framed and portrayed when it comes to the Somali world as studied in academia. I agree with the importance of this discussion and with the necessity to make Somali Studies progress towards an academic field where more and more Somali voices and their angles of investigation will be heard. At the same time, my (little) knowledge about Somalia is already extremely indebted to many notable scholars from the Somali side - if we have to frame it this way - from the past and from the present, and I trust there will be many more in the years to come.

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<sup>12</sup> Most of the field studies of Somalia produced by Western-based researchers in the last 10-15 years were actually carried out in Somaliland. I refer to Ali Nimo-Ilhan, Mark Bradbury, Luca Ciabbarri, Peter Chonka, Nicholas Eubank, Laura Hammond, Markus Hoehne, Michael Walls, Daria Zizzola, among others, while I am sure the list is far longer. The process is now somehow shifting, but it will take some time before a more variegated scientific landscape, including originally Somali contributions, will become more visible and geographically better distributed.

<sup>13</sup> Ever since the outbreak of the Civil War (1989-1991), and as a consequence of Somaliland's self-proclaimed independence, and later, of Puntland's self-declaration of autonomy (1998), the territory of the (ex) Somali Republic has been conceived as divided into three macro areas: Somaliland, Puntland, and South Central Somalia. See also Lewis's *Understanding Somalia and Somaliland* (2008).

Within this context, I would not try to embark on a disquisition of what qualifies as truly Somali as opposed to truly *white* as a mark of the right and legitimacy to have a say or a (research) question. Any engagement with pureness, we know it very well from history, be it political, cultural, or whatever, can lead to disastrous consequences. Colonialism was largely an aberrant process, full of bad impacts and *dislocations* – Fanon *docet* – about which awareness is mandatory. However, in one way or another we are all part of this (colonial) story. The real question is where do we go from here? I addressed this same question to my interviewees.

The generations here at stake, Somalis and Italians, and more specifically the Italoophone Somali diaspora socio-cultural sub-group that I look into,<sup>14</sup> are in fact a by-product of this history. After having experienced on their skin post- and neo-colonialism, among more fortunate and indigenous cultural suggestions, they live today in a ‘transnational’ and *trans-cultural* space. Some dwell within their Diaspora communities, in some urban neighbourhood at the outskirts of big towns. Some have settled down close to the sea, in port towns, maybe as a way to exorcise the lost fascination of Mogadishu. Others have decided to return to Somalia.

Within this (ex) diaspora, those with an *Italoophone* background could make up, I argue, for a distinguished sub-group. I completely ignored their existence before embarking on this research project. Back then, in Somalia, and before becoming a diaspora, they have given their time, resources, and ideas, sometimes even their liberty or their lives, to contribute to a project of social change. Today, after so many years, they all have the same project or dream in their drawer that they silently caress. They tend to work for it, they want to see it unravelled. It is a generation of *ancient combatants* that have been educated and trained to free the country from its big plagues – *ignorance, diseases, and poverty* - in the post-WWII Somalia, the Somalia of the First Republic, and of Siad Barre. They are a reality, and as such they deserve attention. They are subjects and objects of a period of the Somali history that has still plenty of implications in the present.

My idea throughout this research project was to explore the voices of this sub-group of people. I was not interested in the dynamics revolving around governments and institutional development policies. I was rather interested in their stances about social change, development, or call it betterment,

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<sup>14</sup> By *Italoophone Somali diaspora* I mean the ‘Italoophone’ Somali diaspora: a few generations of Somalis - now approaching 50, 60, and 70 years old of age, if not older - with a distinguished and peculiar outlook, shaped by an Italoophone educational background and the direct experience of one or more phases of the modernisation project of the pre-civil war period. For full definition and further details see Chapter 4 and 5.

advancement, *harumarinta*.<sup>15</sup> Corrupted as they are – as we all are – by cultural influences and suggestions, coming from the West as well as from the East, or the Middle East, how do they envisage social change? What is desirable in their eyes for their home country? What is the direction to go, to promote? These were basically my research questions. And then again, how in practice they articulate these visions, what are the issues at stake? And how do they promote change in practice, doing or not doing what? Communicating what? Within this framework, what are the main challenges they are confronted with?

This research project, in other words, is about social change, and communication for social change (CfSC). It falls within the scope of Development Studies, and more in particular at the crossroads between Somali Studies, Migrations/Diaspora Studies (including Social Remittances), and Development Communication (or CfSC). The underpinning question is how a certain group of people (belonging to the Somali Diaspora) frame and promote (communicate) social change in their home country. Inevitably the project takes also into consideration the debate revolving around the Migration & Development nexus, with particular regard to the Social Remittance theory. Other suggestions come from development economics and economics in general, for the role recently assigned to “trade-tested” ideas, values, and rhetoric in the circulation of change.<sup>16</sup>

In particular, I discuss in chapter 2 the theoretical framework of the project, and the disciplinary areas I draw from, as briefly mentioned above. In chapter 3 I focus on the methodological aspects, including the definition of the target population, the sample, and the socio-cultural sub-group of people I ultimately uncover: the Italo-phone Somali diaspora. This is a major finding in itself, which has affected in turn interviewees’ selection and purposive sampling, as I will explain further. In chapter 4, I address constituents and background of this particular class of people within the Somali Diaspora, while detailing the terms of the Italian presence and influence in Somalia from the end of the WWII up to the outbreak of the civil war in 1989-1991. Against this backdrop, I move on to chapter 5, to define, as rooted in the accounts of my interviewees, the current main actors of the Somali *arena*: the leading game players and their peculiarities. In chapter 6, I make a shift in the analysis. From what I call the *outer world*, I pass to discuss the forms of *social or mass control* pertaining to the *inner world*, the world of thoughts, beliefs, hope, and fears. In particular I scrutinise *forms of social control*, as they live at

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<sup>15</sup> *Harumarinta* is the Somali word for advancement, betterment, sometimes development.

<sup>16</sup> I refer more in particular to McCloskey’s trilogy: (2006) *The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce*, (2010) *Bourgeois Dignity: Why Economics Can't Explain the Modern World*, and (2015) *Bourgeois Equality: How Ideas, Not Capital or Institutions, Enriched the World*, University of Chicago Press.

this intangible level, and again, as rooted in the data gathered from this particular socio-cultural group's standpoint. In following chapter 7, I discuss the impact of these forces, resulting in a pervasive state of fear and widespread self-censorship that are full of implications for communication for social change. It is within this framework, after having identified the main elements of the Somali equation, that *social change* in Somalia can be better appreciated. In chapter 8, I discuss then the role that the Italo-phone Somali diaspora sub-group assigns to the Somali Diaspora as a whole as a vector of social change. I discuss it in terms of *social change capital*, as I call it. This is a form of socio-cultural capital, with a pro-active potential, that works as a source of inspiration for promoting social change. In chapter 9, I discuss instead development communication as a vector of social change, and as promoted in practice by the members of the Italo-phone Somali diaspora. Messages, forms, and strategies of their "civic engagement" in Somalia are analysed with respect to the constraints discussed in the previous chapters. Finally, in chapter 10, I conclude by arguing the importance that education plays in this entire story; in shaping the mindset and the socio-cultural capital of the *Italian-Somali Diaspora*, in explaining current forms of communication for social change, and in constituting the ultimate source of any social change in Somalia.

## Chapter 2

# Development Communication or for Social Change

### The ‘Institutional’ Project

Originally Development Communication (DevCom) was defined as:

The art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country and the mass of its people from poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth that makes possible greater social equality and the larger fulfilment of the human potential.

This definition of DevCom was first articulated on December 10, 1971 at the University of the Philippines in Los Banos (UPLB), by Nora Cruz-Quebral. She was, and still is, considered one of the most significant contributors to the development of the discipline at scholarly level. One aspect is to examine development communication as a *field of study*, another is as a *professional practice* and as an *institutional project*.<sup>17</sup> As pointed out by Enghel (2014, 2015) the field of study “is concerned with the role and value of *intentional*<sup>18</sup> communication and media-driven initiatives in the production of democratic social change.”

The *professional practice* instead “is concerned with the *planning*<sup>19</sup> and implementation of communication and media initiatives aimed at achieving a variety of socio-political goals, premised on the assumption that strategic communicational action can cause more or less distinct effects.” Finally the *institutional project*, as designed and implemented by bilateral and multilateral development agencies “gives shape to the practice and the evaluation of development communication, i.e., it sets the rules of the game.”

Both the *professional practice* and the *institutional project* were enacted well before the first definition of DevCom, as provided above, was in circulation in the 70s. In fact, DevCom was born under a given sky and scenario, and inevitably reflected it: it was the top-down merciful project, born in the aftermath of WWII, to bring about development, progress, and civilisation, to the least developed, to the poorest.

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<sup>17</sup> I am borrowing here these categories as defined by Florencia Enghel in her PhD thesis (2014) and then further discussed in Nordicom Review 36 (2015), Special Issue, pp. 11-24.

<sup>18</sup> Italic added.

<sup>19</sup> Italic added.

It came into existence while international institutions were set up in order to supervise peace in the world, and new emergent countries started to free themselves from the grip of colonialism and imperialism. As such this project was predominantly a Western initiative inspired by a modernisation ideal: the best way for the Rest<sup>20</sup> to proceed was to imitate the Western model, to replicate steps and stages of its development (Rostow 1960). Innovation, modernity, could be diffused. They could be distributed, delivered, spread through communication campaigns, media interventions (Schramm 1964), and project delivery at state and community levels (Rogers 1962, Lerner 1958). The change actors and the protagonists of this process were the early adopters, the innovators, the opinion leaders, the opinion influencers, or, as Lerner (1958) put it, the “mobile personality” and the “mobility multipliers”. These types of agents were those ultimately responsible for and causing change to occur, and to be passed onto the (s)lower stratifications of society; to the less informed, the less exposed to the “winds of change”. In other words, they were supposed to enact development, in its dominant meaning as growth and Modernisation, sometimes as human development.

Today DevCom has evolved into something slightly different. At the scholarly level, but not only there. As a research field, and as a normative way to look at how development should circulate, be reproduced, manufactured, exported; the approaches to DevCom have differentiated. Within this framework, DevCom today reflects also the instances and the requests from the “Global south”, from Latin America, from Africa, from South East Asia. The *participatory* approach has been devised and developed as a way to overcome the dominant approach to Development as Modernization, and as Diffusion of Modernity. Take Freire for example (1974), and his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where development communication is a method of critical pedagogy, a dialogic and mutual process meant to liberate the “oppressor” as well as the “oppressed”: the aid providers and the aid receiver. Along similar lines, take DevCom as understood by Melkote and Steeves: not as message exchange but rather as “emancipatory communication” (2015: 39), as people empowerment and social justice, while they bring on board the perspectives of the theology of liberation and the participatory paradigm. Recently, this new way to look at DevCom has generated a shift in the discipline’s focus as a *field of study*, towards alternative and more participatory DevCom practices. Be they the community radio experiences of Ghana or of the African continent in general (Manyozo 2011), the Latin American way of participation (Gamucio-Dragon & Tufte 2006), the social movements and activists’ communication (Wilkins

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<sup>20</sup> I borrow the term from Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*, 1992.

2014a), or the indigenous way to re-gain ownership of its own development in a remote village in India (Thomas 2014).

The evolution in the understanding and in the practice of DevCom is reflected in its definitions. Recent interpretations of the term in fact, which are more engaged with the actual applications rather than the theory, provide for broadened and more inclusive denotations. By taking a closer look at them – emphasis added on keywords below - some underpinning features can be identified, while they are revelatory of a certain approach that is somehow questioned and expanded within the present study. Waisbord (2001) defined development communication as "the application of *communication strategies* and principles in the developing world." This definition basically attributes to DevCom the goal of improving the quality of life of those in the poorer areas of the globe. In some way it resonates with the definition given by Ongkiko and Flor (2003), DevCom "aims *to teach* the poor to improve his life." Wilkins defined it (2000) as "the *strategic application* of communication technologies and processes to promote social change". A few years later, in 2014, in *The International Encyclopaedia of Communication*, she provided for an updated definition:

Development communication refers to strategic communication toward and about social change. Development encompasses intentional strategies designed to benefit the public good, whether in terms of material, political, or social needs. Communication engages mediation by communities, movements, and organizations within these institutional and social structures to promote beneficial dialogic action. This subject is considered in terms of its historical contexts and conceptualizations, and research agendas. Historically, development strategies have targeted developing countries, meaning those with fewer resources than the wealthier countries supporting bilateral and multilateral development institutions. More recently, development goals have been incorporated into social and political protests, through transnational movements actively engaged in promoting economic, political, social, or cultural progress. Social change may be occurring as a result of a variety of factors, such as long-term shifts in policies and political leadership, economic circumstances, demographic characteristics, normative conditions, and ideological values: development communication intersects with social change at the point of intentional, strategic, organized interventions.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In other words, we are talking about a form of Planned Social Change through Communication.

It is quite straightforward here how a new understanding of DevCom, which moves more and more towards the broader concept of Social Change, focuses less on the *Institutional Project* and the *Professional Practice* as designed and devised in the West, and tries to be more inclusive of local experiences and grassroots initiatives: transnational movements, political protests, indigenous alternatives. This twist is also manifest in Nora Quebral's definitions over time. Some thirty years after her original definition, she reworded in 2001 DevCom as "the art and science of human communication linked to a society's *planned* transformation from a state of poverty to one of dynamic socio-economic growth that makes for greater equity and the larger unfolding of individual potential." Again, a few years later, while broadening her original stance, she came up with this phrasing (2012) "the science of human communication linked to the *transitioning* of communities from poverty in all its forms to a dynamic state of overall growth that fosters equity and the advancement of individual potential".

All this being said I am not engaging now in a discourse analysis of the concept of DevCom. This would go far beyond the scope of this work. But just by looking at these definitions, which are mostly concerned with the *professional practice* or the *institutional project*, rather than the *field of study*, some common traits about DevCom can be singled out. By drawing from them, I propose the following set of components in order to *read* how the concept of DevCom is (still) dominantly framed, despite the professed opening up towards other, alternative *practices* – and theories (Thomas & van de Fliert 2014) - of Social Change.

In particular, the following *dimensions* appear to be shared and assumed as common ground about DevCom:

1. *Intentional Dimension*: consciousness, deliberate effort to bring about behavioural/social change.
2. *Strategic Dimension*: strategic design reflecting covert or overt theoretical approaches to behavioural/social change.<sup>22</sup>
3. *Organisational Dimension*: resources, plans, and timeframes organised in a project/programme/social movement's strategy to achieve this goal.
4. *Professional Dimension*: typical of the *Institutional project* or co-opted by development agencies, it is more and more incorporated as well in social movements, activists' communication, and community communication. Development Communicators are more and more, by training or experience, a class of professionals working as such in this field.

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<sup>22</sup> "That strategic communication interventions can and must play a positive role in the production of social change is the central tenet of development communication", Enghel (2014).

5. *Cultural and Physical Distance Dimension*: poverty alleviation, social change, life betterment are meant to take place in a near-desirable future, and are promoted, also from afar, while targeting home countries, communities, and local contexts. All this postulates a tension between a present stage and a future more desirable one in time.

These features change across space, they are context related. North-South relations, geopolitical perspectives, political economy variables (Engel 2015) need to be taken into consideration to fully grasp nature and directionality of DevCom. According to the subject under consideration, the donor or the beneficiaries, the development cooperation agent or the grassroots movements, the local community or the regional governance body; these elements differ and vary in intensity and relevance. Discussing the development initiatives' level of ownerships is a far cry from debating the impact of locally emergent and driven projects. Impacts and perceptions of remotely designed and then transplanted development aid projects are quite different from advocacy and campaigning initiatives originating *from* the locals and *for* the locals.

All these examples fall within the scope of the dominant understanding of DevCom though. When looking at DevCom as a *Professional Practice* and as an *Institutional Project*,<sup>23</sup> the above proposed *Intentional, Strategic, Organisational, and Professional* dimensions prove particularly relevant. Within this context, despite the participatory turn and some more inclusive practices from the global South, the dominant paradigm remains modernist in nature. It is what DevCom scholars have been suggesting and lamenting for years now –among them and more recently: Melkote & Steeves (2015), Thomas & van de Fliert (2014), Wilkins (2014a), Servaes (2013, 2008, 2002), Shah (2011). And this is what Melkote and Steeves observed already in 2001 (:103), when they wrote that “most communication practice and scholarship in the Third World development literature are consistent with Modernization theory”. According to them in fact (2001:143), the “four conceptual as well operational areas that have contributed greatly to an understanding of the social-scientific foundations of communication and mass-communications in general” still prevail in the practice of DevCom today. Notably (2001:144-147): *the Communication Effects Approach, the Mass Media and Modernization Approach, the Diffusion of Innovations Approach, and the Social Marketing Approach*.<sup>24</sup> They still hold true today: they are in line with what dominantly happens in the field of DevCom. At least it is so when we look at DevCom as the

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<sup>23</sup> I deliberately skip for now the *Field of Study*.

<sup>24</sup> For further reference see Melkote and Steeves (2001), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

*professional practice* and the *institutional project* that is devised by the so-called developed world in order to bring about development and social change in the developing one.

## **Drawing from Somali Studies & Somali Agents**

The dominant understanding and practice of DevCom as tentatively defined in the previous section is only a part of the story. Limiting our attention to this would be like failing to see the forest for the trees. The contemporary world experiences a dimension of DevCom that I consider to be quite substantial and determinant, and whose magnitude and potential remains understudied. I refer in particular to how DevCom is practiced at the transnational level, across diaspora communities and migration networks, linking destinations and countries of origin, individuals and communities of provenance. A form of DevCom – *Diaspora DevCom*, as I call it - that connects people and ‘development paradigms’, ideals and practices, through simple, capillary, and spontaneous acts of communication. A form that, I maintain, is also likely to be conducive to a real process of social change, maybe more effectively than other official or planned interventions. This dimension, so far, has been overlooked within the *field of study*, although the discipline has experienced a shift in its focus towards social movements’, activists’, and community communication. Tufte’s recent contribution (2017) eventually adopting a “citizen perspective” meant to “enhance opportunities for citizen-led change” goes in this direction, I believe. Yet, at the level of the *institutional project*, where Diaspora DevCom’s potential could have been massively streamlined and enhanced, there is still a long way to go.

As a peculiarity, in *Diaspora DevCom*, the *Professional*, the *Organisational*, the *Strategic*, and the *Intentional* dimensions, as discussed above, are very differently characterised, if not present at all in communication exchange. Nevertheless, I argue that these communication flows qualify more often than not as a form of DevCom. The agents are not professional, the strategy might be very basic, and the organisational level completely missing, but this does not mean that impact and effectiveness are trivial. On the contrary, its impacts and would-be impacts would be of the utmost relevance, and certainly worth further investigation. I address and revisit one by one these dimensions from a *Diaspora DevCom* perspective:

1. *Intentionality*: one of the main tenets of DevCom (Wilkins, Enghel), proves less essential here. The communication act at diasporic level, the purposeful communication act, the media use associated

with it, can be consciously or unconsciously driven by the desire - and expectation - to bring about (behavioural) change and have an impact on the receiver/interlocutor back home.<sup>25</sup>

2. *Strategy*: this dimension is very differently connoted. Diasporic strategies have less to do with theoretical approaches to social and behavioural change, and more with mere communication strategies. But they are usually inspired by a very good understanding of the context, the mentality, and the mind-set of the target audiences. Moreover, at this diffused level, the language barrier does not represent an obstacle any longer: target audiences, interlocutors, and communicators speak the same language. It thus provides for a good common ground whereupon relationships and communication flows can be built effectively.
3. *Organisation*: this dimension is missing or only casually matched.
4. *Professionalism*: this dimension is completely missing at this level.
5. *Cultural and Physical Distance*: asymmetries across Diaspora communities, and between the Diaspora and the Home country, in the actual and the perceived level of well-being and ‘development’, as well as in terms of what is ‘right’ and what is ‘wrong’ engender commitments and engagements.

In this new meaning, DevCom encompasses processes and dynamics that take place at diffused, local, and micro level. These phenomena fall within the scope of a broadened understanding of DevCom, which is not just *communication for development* – C4D (Servaes 2007, Lennie & Tacchi, 2013), but rather *communication for social change* - CfSC (Tuftte 2017, Gumucio-Dagron & Tuftte, 2006) or *communication for development and social change* – C4DSC (McAnany, 2014). These recent re-definitions of the concept prove in other words comprehensive enough to include actors and activities relevant for this research, as it will become clearer.

Particularly striking is the fact that these same phenomena and processes have been investigated and highlighted from other disciplinary perspectives, without making any reference whatsoever to the field of DevCom. From a sociological point of view, the main point of contact with DevCom, I argue, is the Social Remittance Theory. But before discussing in detail the implications of this disciplinary overlap, and the benefits that DevCom, as a *research field*, can draw from it, I engage, in the next section, with a brief overview of the relevance of migrations and Diasporas, in the broader field of development studies.

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<sup>25</sup> See along similar lines, Levitt’s distinction between “recipient observers”, “instrumental adapters”, and “purposeful innovators” (2001). The same could apply to different types of Diasporic Development Communicators. Not all of them would engage at the same level of intentionality, but their role could in some cases be associated to those assigned by the Modernization theory to innovators, opinion leaders, multipliers, etc.

## The Change at Stake: the Interdisciplinary Nature of Migrations

One of the major limits of DevCom is its sporadic, unsystematic reference to other strands of thought. DevCom specialists often resort to knowledge and expertise developed in other disciplinary areas: take for example, development economics, agricultural development, rural sociology, or the anthropology of development. As Thomas (2015) commented:

The theorisation of CSC has always been dependent on borrowings from other disciplines – from rural sociology that provided the basis for the diffusion model to the radical pedagogy best illustrated by the contributions made by the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire.

This casual reference to author and concepts, including those deriving from the so-called Modernization theory, does not go beyond something more solid than the expression of the personal interest of the given author for the given strand of thought. Yet there is scope, I argue, for synergies and cross-fertilisation across disciplinary fields as apparently distant as Diaspora and Development Studies on the one hand and DevCom on the other hand.

Ours is an *Information Age*, as brilliantly anticipated and described by Manuel Castells (1996-1998) in his trilogy. But it is also a time of exodus, displacements, great movements, shifting Diasporas, and transnational networks: an *Age of Migration*, as Castles (et al. 2013) titled his book some years back.<sup>26</sup> Migrations and Diasporas are at the core of the on-going social transformations of our globalised world. They work as vectors, among other competing and parallel forces, responsible for processes of social change. These processes take place, spontaneously, silently, away from the ephemeral attention of the media, or the conventional policy wisdom of projects and programmes. In this respect, neoclassical economics is merely interested in explaining migrations in terms of individual income maximisation and “push-pull” factors. Development Economics is more interested in the general impacts that migration can possibly have, in both the *sending and the receiving* countries, and not only from a strict economic point of view (Collier 2013). But it is with the advent of Development Studies, with their constitutional attention for the ‘sending’ countries that the focus shifts completely onto the countries of origin, while it encompasses Migration, Diaspora, Transnationalism, and Sociology as areas of study. Within this framework, the *Migration and Development Nexus* is the policy and academic

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<sup>26</sup> For the first time in 1993 and again in 2013, on occasion of the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the classic.

“mantra”<sup>27</sup> of the last 15 years when discussing the impact that migrations have, or could possibly have, for development in the countries of origin. Basically, the huge bundle of literature deriving from this effort has ‘read’ this nexus focussing on three core outcomes: *(financial) remittances*, *brain drain* issues, and role of *Diasporas* in development (Raghuram 2009).<sup>28</sup>

Quite strikingly, this very debate resonates with similar strength and character in the niche of Somali Development Studies. In this context, the transnational commitment of the Somalis, their mobilisation and engagement through the development aid sector, as well as the role played by (financial) remittances, have received ample attention and scrutiny, as attested by the conspicuously relevant literature (Horst 2017, 2014, 2013; Mezzetti et al. 2014; Carling et al. 2012; Hammond 2011, Kleist 2008). Nevertheless, as Sinatti and Horst (2015) have argued, with clear foresight and in the realm of development discourse and practice, Diaspora members’ potential as “development agents” is unfortunately limited by “essentialised understandings”, which are precisely typical of the development industry. These authors, while looking at the Somali context, show an understanding of the role played by Diasporas that goes far beyond the mere financial remittances or the return migration/technical assistance projects financed by Western donors.<sup>29</sup> Yet, very cautiously and only sporadically, they open up their view to include the social remittance perspective (Levitt), which is particularly relevant instead for the purposes of the present study. Even less so, to the best of my knowledge, has anybody within the Somali Studies area so far addressed the importance that Somali Diaspora members can have in promoting development/social change in their home country from a development communication perspective.

Similar traits mark out the literature on Migration and Development (M&D) in general. Yet, already in 2015, by looking at the agenda of the 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Migration and Development,<sup>30</sup> the reader is struck by the number of working papers – absolutely quantitative in nature – dealing with the transfer of norms from one country to the other. In a couple of them,

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<sup>27</sup> I borrow the term from Devesh Kapur, “Remittances: The New Development Mantra?” in *Remittances: Development Impact and Future Prospects*, eds. S. M. Maimbo and Dilip Ratha (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Apart from the intricacies of this debate, it suffices to say here that many scholars and authors are engaged with it, be they mainstreaming or unconventional. Unfortunately it would take too long to list them all: Bakewell, Castles, Clemens, de Haas, Faist, Raghuram, Glick Schiller, Piper, Portes, Sinatti, Sorensen, Van Hear, to recall just a few.

<sup>29</sup> For an overview of migration and development programmes see International Centre for Migration Policy Development – ICMPD and International Organisation for Migrations (IOM), *Enhancing Diaspora Engagement, Operational Guidelines for South-South and Triangular Cooperation*, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Organised by World Bank Development Research Group (DECRG), jointly with the French Development Agency (AFD), and the Center for Global Development (CGD)

*International Migration: Driver of political and Social Change*, and in *Can I have permission to leave the House? Return Migration and the Transfer of Gender Norms*, the authors (Tuccio et al. 2016, and Tuccio & Wahba 2015) discuss the impact of migrants and returnees in bringing about political/social change in their families and home environments. While controlling for both emigrations and return migration selections, they come to the conclusion that these transfers affect political attitudes as well as actual behaviours and can be negative in nature depending on the sending destination.<sup>31</sup>

It is the closing of the circle. Despite certain sectarianism, from the M&D perspective we irrefutably return back to the realm of Social Remittances, although nobody apparently dares to treat them as such and call them by their name, not to mention to make reference to the relevant “qualitative” literature. The bottom line here is that Migrations and Diaspora are not just a matter of financial remittances. Their impact in cultural and normative terms is far greater, and articulated, as for long now, grasped and discussed by the Social Remittance Theory.

### *Social Remittance Theory*

Within the broader field of Development and International Studies, another way to scrutinize the role of international Diasporas is through reference to the Social Remittance Theory. Basically, all authors and scholars engaged within this field agree more or less with two things: the first one, that along with financial remittances, migrants are engaged with broader visions and transfers - social remittances - in their interactions with their counterparts, and that these processes play a key role in bringing about social change. In this respect, transnational communities and Diasporas prove to be particularly relevant as vectors and channels through which this change circulates (Kleist 2008, Kapur 2010, Schiller et al. 2010). The second aspect is the nature of these Social Remittances, a concept that was first coined and elaborated by Peggy Levitt in 1998. She distinguishes between three types of social remittances: normative structures (ideas, values, beliefs); systems of practice (“actions shaped by normative structures” and organizational strategies); and thirdly, social capital understood as the transfer of prestige and social esteem. Ideas, values, behaviours, and know-how circulate not only through the actual migratory acts, but also intellectually, in the networks and exchange processes eased by the transnational existence of the migrants, as windows over borders (Levitt & Rajaram, 2013).

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<sup>31</sup> They talk about non-Western countries where the quality of political and social institutions are lower, or conservative Arab countries, which are conducive to negative and “highly discriminatory” gender norms (labour force participation, education, fertility).

Qualitative in nature, this theory has provided the background underpinning much research meant to inspect the nature and the impact of these transfers, across borders, in the sending as well as in the receiving communities. Over the last ten years this literature has become extensive, with authors from Eastern Europe, Asia, South-East Asia, Central and Latin America engaged in revealing the impact that historical migration flows have had on development and social change within sending countries/communities. Take for example the work on India and China (Holdaway et al. 2015), Bangladesh (Gardner 1995, Dannecker 2005, Sabur & Hasan 2008), Thailand (Suksomboon 2008), Mexico (Goldring 2004), Dominican Republic (Levitt 2001), Romania (Nedelcu 2011), Ukraine (Kubal 2015), the Euro-Mediterranean area (Lahlou 2010). Others have discussed the nature and features of these processes more in general while theorizing on their constituents (Levitt 1998, Levitt & Nyberg-Sørensen 2004, Levitt & Lamba-Nieves 2011, Markley 2011), even though Levitt's theoretical framework has remained basically unquestioned and it has been adopted indifferently by all contributors to this disciplinary area.

Levitt, in the section “Mechanism of Transmission” of the *The Transnational Villagers* (2001: 63), elaborates on forms and features of the exchange processes that entail social remittances. Main channels are return migration, visits, and all those interactions whose medium can be the telephone call, the email, the video, or the letter. Size and intensity of these mechanisms of transmission have leapt forward in more recent years as a result of the Information and Communication Technology revolution of the contemporary world. Moreover Levitt points out some underlining characteristics of these processes: they travel through *identifiable pathways*, they are transmitted *systematically and intentionally*, and they are directed at a particular individual or group of people. In other words they have a marked *interpersonal character*, or they come “with references”, as she puts it.

But who are the agents of these processes, the triggers of these transnational flows? In this respect, and as a mere conceptual tool, Levitt identifies in *The Transnational Villagers* three different patterns of interaction of the Dominican migrants - from Miraflores - with the hosting society (2001: 57), namely Boston in the USA. As Kleist (2008) concisely summarises it they are: *recipient observers* (passively taking in new ideas), *instrumental adapters* (altering routines for pragmatic reasons), and *purposeful innovators* (searching, selecting, and absorbing new things). Moreover when discussing the “Determinants of Impact” (2001: 64) Levitt elaborates on the characteristics of the *messenger*, and more in particular of status and leadership, as playing a pivotal role. Analogies and similarities with the classifications that can be drawn from the Modernization and the Diffusion theory are quite striking. Take Rogers, for example, and the distinctions he makes between *Innovators*, *Early Adopters*, and

*Laggards*. Or the role that all modernists have always assigned to opinion leaders and multipliers (Rogers & Kincaid 1981, Schramm 1964, Lerner 1958, Katz 1955, among others) in what I would call *the communication and change nexus*. Even though Levitt's classification still has contemporary relevance, I am going to elaborate on the agents of this process in the following section, and further in the last one, when I will propose a new conceptual framework.

In this section, while looking at “the change at stake”, I have showed how the social and academic relevance of diasporas and migrations have been addressed from many entry points within the social theory. Within this framework, concepts and provisions of the Social Remittance Theory lend quite a few arguments to the very close - in practice - but still very distant - in theory - field of DevCom. It is adopting this sociological perspective in other words, that the concept of Development Communication can be revised, as a form, I maintain, of Social Remittance. But first I touch upon some reflections on the agents of change.

## **The Agents of Change**

DevCom, since its advent, in the aftermath of WWII, has been characterized by the prevalence given to the communication practice of *institutional* and *professional* development agents. Ever since an arrogantly dominant development paradigm, the *omnipotent source*, the modernization theory, and the diffusion model have often laid at the core of the *developmental* effort. The participatory approach, which began approximately in the 70s, attributed instead greater importance to the cultural identity of the local communities (MacBride et al. 1980). It promoted a development strategy that was not only inclusive but also emanating directly from the receivers/audience (Freire 1974). Hence it tended to focus on new community driven/participated practices, while it inspired the research field as well. The current attention devoted to social movements, activists, and social media communication basically originates from this same approach.

As Wilkins puts it in fact (2014a), in recent years communication research has addressed mainly three areas: communication used by development organisations, activist driven communication for social mobilisation, and (social) media focused communication advocating for social and political change. In other words when DevCom research does not investigate the communication as emanating from ‘traditional’ and well established development agents (Governments, ODA, IOs, NGOs, LNGOs, CSOs, etc.) it looks into examples of resistance and the shaping of more “sustainable

futures”, as promoted by social movements’ and activists’ communication. Typically, development aid, action, and discourse have monopolised – and they still do in many cases - our common understanding of the *what* at stake. Today, however, new/old areas of practice call for a renewed research scope. DevCom as a research field looks into the entertainment industry, the so-called transnational advocacy networks, the generational youth, or the grassroots movements (Tufte 2017, Melkote & Steeves 2015, Wilkins 2014a). Hence DevCom, de facto, is less and less an *Institutional Project*, or a mere *Professional practice*. These later developments prove this once more.

Yet, what seems quite striking is a simultaneous die-hard mentality that even at the scholarly level still reflects a modernization or an institutional posture to say the least, and a top-down approach to DevCom. Jan Servaes, while concluding his edited book on “Sustainability, Participation & Culture in Communication” (Servaes, 2013) writes:

Development or social change should be equated with empowerment: the ability of people to influence the wider system and take control of their lives... It is obvious that people cannot do this entirely on their own. It also requires effort on the part of development change partners (**agencies and agents**)<sup>32</sup> to help solve some of the dysfunctions in the system and create the enabling conditions

“It’s obvious that people cannot do this entirely on their own”, they need to this end “development change partners”: agents and agencies. If we take these words at face value we are easily tempted to make an equation: to equate the agents to the *experts* and the agencies to the *international organisations* that “engineer” development. This is exactly what William Easterly labels as “The Tyranny of Experts” (Easterly, 2013). DevCom, as a *field of study*, when it does not privilege the *institutional* or the *professional* practice, still has some issues in defining and identifying the circle of its subjects. As a result, even when it adopts a more bottom-up, citizen-focused, or communitarian approach, it still looks for new more or less *organised* forms of communication for social change. A full, complete, and unequivocal shifting towards the diffused, unofficial, and spontaneous communication activities of the emergent *development communicators* is yet to occur.

This study argues instead that the Somali Diaspora members *are themselves* the actor of change, *per se*, despite or beyond planned top-down mobilization efforts, technical assistance projects, or organised forms of resistance. This repositioning of the subject’s focus of the discipline, while it is not

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<sup>32</sup> Emphasis added.

meant to provide for a robust theorization of the processes of social change, as auspicated by many (e.g. Thomas, 2014), nor to prove a cause-effect relationship between engagement and actual change, will help fill a gap in this academic arena. By doing so I intend to meet a double purpose: answering the invitation “to return to some concerns of the economic and material base of developing societies”, as formulated by McAnany (2014), as well as the invitation, originally formulated by Tufte and Hemer in 2012 - and restated in 2014 – that reads “it is high time we refocus our attention to the deliberative,” – as opposed to prescriptive – “non-institutional citizen-driven change processes, full of media uses and communicative practices”.

Operating this shift, naming it, describing it, means to make it exist in the political, as well as in the policy and the academic arenas. For it exists already at social and interpersonal levels, while its salience and relevance urgently needs recognition. If this has not happened yet from a DevCom perspective, the Social Remittance theory on the one hand, and the Migration & Development Nexus literature on the other hand, have at least approached the issue while discussing ‘migrants’ as change agents.

Thomas Faist in his popular contribution “Migrants as Transnational Development Agents: An Inquiry into the NeWest Round of the Migration-Development Nexus” (2008) remains an unparalleled starting point of discussion. Basically he maintains that the new – in 2008 - enthusiasm linked to the migration-development nexus has contributed to the opening up of new “discursive opportunities” at the public policy level, that focus on migrants “as collective agents of change”. As a result, “[s]tates, development agencies and international organisations try to support the circulatory mobility of persons engaged”; of “migrant associations in particular”. Be it through village and hometown associations, networks of businesspersons, or epistemic networks. Yet all these opportunities, even at implementation level, remain *state mediated*, they reflect in other words, an *institutional project*, or as Faist labels it an “Institutional dimension”. Apart from the fact that “transnational collectives, such as groups, associations, organisations and diasporas, cannot be treated as unitary actors if one wants to understand the tensions inherent in transnational spaces”, it is also true that “opportunities for transnational actors have changed in the process of globalisation”. Migrants as agents of change are not just and only relevant in their collective dimensions. As Faist puts it:

Because of the apparent increase in interconnectedness through long-distance communication, facilitated face-to-face communication and interaction through travel, the

diffusion of ideas and knowledge, economic, cultural and political life across the borders of states has become more dense and extensive. The spaces 'in between' states have multiplied.

And it is exactly these *spaces in between*, beyond or *despite* states, that are particularly relevant here and for the purposes of this study. The revaluation of the role of the single, still as part of a community and of a group of course, but above all, *en tant que* single, irrespective of her/his frequentation of a public dimension, of her/his role in a associative context. It is about the individual in its individual capacity, it is about interpersonal agency, the one-to-many and the many-to-one relationships that describe transnational networks of individuals interacting across communities, borders, and cultures. It is in other words, the social remittance perspective; which proves quite promising and relevant here, in consideration of the peculiar traits of the Somali Diaspora. The controversial relationship of the Somali with a still precarious State and with federalism, the power of the clan as a form of social identification and mobilization, the general widespread sentiment of *aid fatigue*, the mistrust in any 'Institutional project' whatsoever, exacerbated maybe, by a still strong nomadic cultural tradition, which is reflected in the outputs of its still strong orality.

And it is towards a better understanding of this individual dimension that Nicholas Van Hear, Stephen Castles, and Hein de Haas, some years ago (2010), in their prominent JEMS issue on "Theories of Migration and Social Change", provided for an account of migrants' *agency*.<sup>33</sup> A contribution that links to Lahlou's (2010) case study account of the role played by "Migrants as Agents of change in the Euro-Mediterranean Area". Nevertheless, as already mentioned, Sinatti & Horst (2015) claim that "essentialised understanding" of international Diasporas in the European public discourse and European countries' practice remain dominant. As they put it "First, development is conceived of as the planned activities of Western professional development actors; second, diasporas are seen as actual communities rooted in a national 'home' and sharing a group identity; and third, migration is regarded as binary mobility". All this "limit[s] the potential of diaspora engagement as a mean of innovating the development industry by broadening understandings of what development entails and how it can be done."

This project assigns a distinctive role to the individual, as an agent of change in its own right. By doing so it is also meant to unravel what development – read *social change* - entails, and how it *is*

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<sup>33</sup> A possible definition of the concept is put forward by the Critical Theory (Frankfurt School): *agency* would be the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices while interacting with and within a given structure (the social world's rules, norms, and beliefs).

preached in the everyday practice of the Somali Diaspora member, “full of media uses”, social remittances, and development communication.

## **The Direction of Change, or What Social Change?**

Development Communication for Social Change, as a field of study, was first characterized by a strong focus on the modernization theory as a theory of development change (Servaes 2008, 1999). Authors such as Rogers, Rostow, Schramm, and Lerner in their Orientalism or Thirdworldism lent quite a few arguments to UNESCO’s eagerness to define communication’s role in development discourse. As a reaction to that modernization theory, the dependency theory first, the world system theory afterwards, and finally a supposed multiculturalism or multiplicity theory gave way, in the realm of development communication, to the so called participatory approach (Servaes, Melkote & Steeves, Freire, etc.). A ‘cultural turn’ that began to focus on culture, values and the empowerment of people, rather than on technology and economics. Latin America and South Asia lent many examples qualifying as participatory or empowering people, thus entailing a counter development strategy that resisted the arrogance of the Western top-down model (Tuftte 2017, Melkote and Steeves 2015), not to mention the dominance of the development paradigm as growth (Escobar 2011, Sachs 2007).

Yet, as Thomas (2014) puts it “the dominant paradigm is yet to “pass”, and ...rather unfortunately, the participatory model has been co-opted within this framework”. Studies such as Mosse’s (2005), and Baaz’s (2005) would confirm this impression, at least in the realm of DevCom as an *Institutional Project* and a *Professional Practice*. In their work, both authors corroborate this die-hard Western- superior- omniscient- self-reliable-mentality that socially produces the ‘success’ of the development project at the implementing level.

This research project, targeting a country such as Somalia, in the Horn of Africa, aims at reviving this historical debate within the discipline, while extending its scrutiny at a more diffuse level, that of the *unofficial development agent*, of the *individual* member of the diaspora *as agent of change*. The focus is not any longer at the mass media level, or within the traditional realms of ‘planned’ initiatives, but within the spheres of the individual spontaneous communication practice, and beyond the fence of the ‘aid industry’. Well into the micro-physics of development, or more neutrally put, of social change, in the localized circuits, mechanisms, and the extended networks through which change/development “circulates”. Actually, the dispute revolving around the nature and forms of the propagation of the

dominant paradigm, and how it continues to *de facto* inspire foreign policy as well as development practice, has never ceased to exist (Wilkins 2013, 2009; Shah 2011, Mosse 2005, Baaz 2005). What I propose here, in line with the suggested shifting of focus onto diffused *agents of change*, is a shifting in the analysis of this debate at people level, among the Somali Diaspora Agents as potential multipliers and vehicles of that same dominant paradigm.

This does not mean that the present study is informed by a particular theory, or assumption, in this respect. The research as it is, does not engage in any quantitative testing of hypothesis, nor in the proving or the disproving of a supposed modernization mind-set among the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora. This study is rather exploratory in nature, and reflects what emerges from the empirical investigations, while addressing the research question “What kind of Social Change, or Development, or Advancement, if any, do the Italoophone Somali diaspora members envisage for their home country?” Actually my approach is almost participatory, as elaborated in the Methodological Chapter 3. In the carrying out of my investigations I have taken into consideration recommendations and suggestions that come from (again) the M&D literature. Among others, I refer in particular to Petra Dannecker (2009), in her work *Migrant Visions of Development: A Gendered Approach*, and to Parvati Raghuram (2009) in his paper *Which Migration, What Development? Unsettling the Edifice of Migration and Development*. Both appeared on the special issue of the journal *Population, Space, and Place*, from 2009, which hosted an enlightening debate on “Rethinking the Migration-Development Nexus – Bringing marginalized visions and actors to the fore”.

This is to say that, aware of the risk of transferring onto research participants and actors a pre-cooked framework of analysis, along with their apparatus of codes and categories, I made sure not to substitute my wording and my conceptual tools for theirs, nor my understanding to theirs. In this sense I adopted a sort of participatory approach in the definition of the concept of *Social Change* itself, which lies at the core of the present research. I did not ask my interviewees to provide possible solutions to a certain problem stated already in the beginning. I inquired with them instead about their understanding of (social) change in their home country, its essence and main constituents. As a result, they had to identify and label their own issues without having been explicitly asked to do so. Only afterwards, and inductively, I came to appreciate their understanding: the type of Social Change that emerged – as in the grounded theory – from my research participants’ perspective. The Italoophone Somali diaspora conceive of change as a transformation in the main Somali *social institutions*. I will elaborate extensively on this in the coming chapters and more in particular in Chapter 6 (in the section on “Social Institution and Social Change”).

## Development Communication Revisited

How do social remittances circulate? As already mentioned, Levitt makes a brief reference to telephone calls, emails, visits, returns, etc. From this it can be easily deduced that the act of remitting presupposes always an act of communication. Social remittances produce an impact, generate and engender a process of social change, a behavioural change, a cultural change, a moral change, along interpersonal networks. I propose to look at these processes as a form of DevCom, or Communication for Social Change (CfSC), in a new acceptance. Not as the *Institutional project*, nor as the *Professional practice*, or even less as the *Field of study*, but as *Social remittances*. The communications flows that accompany and materialise the social remittance process are indeed a form of CfSC in the broadened understanding I am putting forward. The Agents of this process are the members of the Diaspora, the Somali Diaspora members in this particular case, who qualify as Agents of Change and as Social Change Communicators. More on this point in the next section.

Somehow relevant to this line of reasoning, it is worth mentioning a working paper study appeared in January 2015 on the *Transnational Studies Initiative* working papers series (Harvard University). Thomas Lacroix, the author, makes for the first time reference to the “The Communicative Dimension of Migrant Remittances and its Political Implications”. He writes: “I see remittances as communicative actions, through which migrants express who they think they are beyond the contradictory nature of their condition”.<sup>34</sup> Remittances are then understood and analysed as a “communicational medium between migrants and non-migrants”, and “as communicative acts” they “engage actors towards their political community” and as such “are endowed with a political potency”: be they monetary remittances, the building of a house, productive investments, or collective remittances, as he discusses in the paper. It is clear how Lacroix engages with unravelling the communicative nature of financial remittances, and other *monetized* forms of diasporic engagement.

Expanding and elaborating on this, I posit that any act of social remittance presupposes an act of communication: a tension, interaction between two subjects, the migrant and the non-migrant, the member of the Diaspora and the left behind. The former often accounts for the ‘developed’ whilst the latter for the ‘developing’, in the dominant meaning of the term. Or, more neutrally put, the former advocating for change in a certain direction, with a more or less clear plan and vision, the latter resisting or promoting change in another, while negotiating, accommodating, or counteracting what is often

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<sup>34</sup> Lacroix, Thomas (2015), “The Communicative Dimension of Migrant Remittances and its Political Implications”, in TSI Working Paper Series, No. 2, pp. 1-9

perceived as *exogenous*. Within this research I focus more on the first process, on the (ex) migrant-home country relationship, adopting the perspective of a (ex) Western-based Somali diaspora member. As such Italoophone Somali diaspora members, represent a ‘foreign’ driver of change that has an *endogenous* nature though, a stronger cultural link with the target, an indigenous mark, and a common vehicular language.

All these elements put together strategically enhance the chances of DevCom’s actual implication for Social Change, to a greater extent, maybe, than the *Institutional project* can aim for. By reason of their nature, and of the relational positions that they entail, these acts of communication are *asymmetric*, or perceived as such, in many regards (Carling 2008a). As Nyberg-Sørensen & Stepputat (2001) put it “[e]xperiences of mobility bestow authority on the moving subjects”. These asymmetries impact the relationship of power and ascendancy between the two sides: social status, experience, and (exclusive) knowledge distribution contribute to explain, among other factors, the very existence of this engagement, the very essence of the commitment that underpins diasporic engagement with the home country. The carrying out of this investigation, while adopting a proper DevCom or rather CfSC angle, implies looking at a covert or overt relationship between a Western context and a Somali (mythical) homeland, between a supposedly developed and a developing entity, between better offs and worse offs. Within this context, study and investigation of the role of Diasporas, including the Somali one, as Social Change Communicators has remained, quite surprisingly, completely unattended. As said, this research proposal is meant to fill this gap while expanding on the discipline’s overly regimented traditional boundaries, in terms of categories of acts and agents of change.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Somali Diaspora members are proposed here as *new* (old) Development Agents, or better said, as *new* Social Change Agents. As discussed in the section on “The Agents of Change” they are the long overlooked actual actors of the process here at stake. Towards a better understanding of their role, I have reviewed the academic contributions that stem from both the M&D nexus literature, and the Social Remittance Theory. Apart from their invaluable insights, both perspectives only marginally address the communicative aspects of these agents’ endeavours as it would be desirable in the context of DevCom.

If social remittances can qualify, at least in part, as acts of Communication for SC, social remitters can in turn qualify as *Social Change Communicators*. But what is the direction of the promoted Social Change process? Is there any pattern to be identified, or to be expected on the basis of previous literature? Drawing from the Modernization theory the answer is quite obvious. But also looking at the Social Remittance theory recurring categories lead to similar conclusions. Take for example the seminal work of Peggy Levitt titled “Social Remittances: Migration Driven Local-level Forms of Cultural Diffusion”, from 1998, or again Levitt & Rajaram (2013) in “Moving toward Reform? Mobility, health, and development in the context of neoliberalism”, where they argue that over time, the Indian returnees’ understanding of health and health care became increasingly similar to Western standards, “ultimately incorporating many aspects of neo-liberalism”. Or take Ilka Vari-Lavoisier (2015) with “Social Remittances as Mimetic Diffusion Processes: From Homophily to Imitation in Transnational Networks”. In her work she maintains that returnees, by reason of their experience abroad, which has contributed to free them from the local authority, the local practice, and the criteria of local legitimacy, can challenge corruptive practices in their hometown of origin. If, like she quotes from Hume, “governors have nothing to support them but opinion”, “the impact of migrations on migrants’ opinions and political expectations can be a powerful source of political evolutions”. Isn’t it that we are talking about the Modernization theory and the Diffusion of Innovation in disguise? The mimetic processes mentioned above, travelling along peer networks (Rogers & Kincaid 1981, Katz & Lazarsfeld 2017), hierarchically ordered though, aren’t they a re-edition of the Modernization tenets? Isn’t it that, as Thomas puts it, “the Modernization approach is yet to pass”, and not only at global or top-down level; but also at individual, diffused, bottom-bottom, and interpersonal level? All this seem to me a comeback of the work of Rogers, and before him of Tarde, and the role played by the principle of innovation and memetics. Aren’t the migrants the early adopters of new visions and maybe missions? Isn’t Vari-Lavoisier (2015) talking about *homophily* as opposed to *heterophily* in the same meaning discussed by Rogers - and before by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954) – in his classic *The Diffusion of Innovations*?

Yet, no cross reference is made. The two disciplines lie too far apart, normatively and descriptively speaking. The striking element in all this, and the irony at the same time, is the lack of any reference whatsoever to the work of the Modernists and *Memetists*, exception made for the case recalled above. Something similar to what I have pointed out when discussing the lack of dialogue between quantitative and qualitative perspectives on (social) remittances and on the M&D nexus. I ignore the reasons for this, whether it is a deliberated omission or just oblivious. Be it how it may, the main point

here is another one. The need to look at this process for what it is, more than what it is expected to be. The Modernization and the Diffusion theory remain in the background, as a general framework. They are meant not to inspire the investigation ex-ante but rather the analysis ex-post, if need and relevance arise. Tools and categories typical of the discipline will help cast some light when and only if the empirical evidence will support their employment.

## Chapter 3

### Qualitative Social Research Study

[...] nobody would come to tell you how things are in reality,  
they would tell you in a superficial way, those who are in Somalia,  
either they do not tell you what they actually think,  
or they do not tell you how things are in reality

*Interview with Jamilah (25:98)*

And \*\*\*\*\* told me that she didn't find anybody willing to talk to you,  
people are afraid you know, they do not want to expose themselves,

I instead, I have accepted immediately

*Interview with Uba (24:11)*

#### Qualitative in Nature

As already mentioned in the Introduction, this research project addresses the following research questions: *how do Somali diaspora members/agents envisage social change in their home country?*<sup>35</sup> And, as sub-questions: *how do they communicate and promote it back home? What are the main challenges they are confronted with?* In other words this research is about **social change**, and **communication for social change** (CfSC) in Somalia, as experienced and promoted by members of the Somali Diaspora and returnees alike at non-institutional and interpersonal levels.

The project has been designed within the interdisciplinary field of Development Studies, while drawing from Somali Studies, Communication for Social Change, and Migration/Diaspora Studies. However, these strands of knowledge have worked more as a general framework of understanding, rather than as direct source of analysis and interpretation. Basically, the underlining approach I have adopted is consistent with the main precepts of the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967, Corbin & Strauss 2008). My research questions and sub-questions have been addressed to my interlocutors

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<sup>35</sup> Of course in my interviews I never approached this question in these exact terms. I resorted to synonyms such as *change* in general, advancement, betterment, sometimes the Somali word *Harumarinta*, etc.

while allowing them absolute freedom of answer, and without suggesting pre-conceived replies. The present study is an exploratory investigation about the nature and the characteristics of the purposeful communication flows that link members of the Somali Diaspora to their counterpart back home. Given the object of this research – social change - a qualitative approach, which for the purposes of data collection bordered ethnography, proved to be more suitable in order to address the research question here under investigation. My intention was not to test a hypothesis, or to test the holding of a pre-existent theoretical framework. My intention was to make some phenomena surface, to the level of a more explicit knowledge, and, by the same token, to describe the nature and qualities of such phenomena.

To this end, as discussed in the chapter on the theoretical framework, I rely on the main findings of the Social Remittance Theory, Development Communication - while contrasting its dominant understanding (and practice) - as well as Somali (Diaspora and) Development Studies. From the Social Remittance Theory I borrow the concept of social remittance (Levitt 2001, Kapur 2010), which I combine with a proposed new understanding of Development Communication, as diffused, bottom-up, if not bottom-bottom process of Social Change, spontaneously occurring at interpersonal level. The Somali Development Studies' component informs instead the general understanding of the context, and the reliance on the general knowledge about: the role played by the Somali Diaspora members towards their country of origin, their well-established commitment in terms of financial as well as social remittances (Hammond, Horst, Kleist, Lindley, Mezzetti, etc.), and more in general, the political, cultural, economic, and religious trends within which this commitment is embedded.

Actually, this project is about tension: a tension between two orders of subjects, two realities, two contexts. It is about a covert or overt relationship between a *supposedly* developed and a developing entity. On the one hand, the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora, as bearers of a *social change capital*, as I will discuss more in-depth in the course of this dissertation, and as emerged from the data.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, Somalia, and the people left behind, the group of peers, relatives, families, communities; the masses as a whole.

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<sup>36</sup> This 'capital' has been further gathered, filtered, and renegotiated during their diasporic experience. For more details see Chapter 4, section on "Italian Somali Diaspora Today" and Chapter 8, section on "Social Change Capital".

## From Ethnography to Semi-Structured Interviews

### *Research Methods*

For the purpose of data collection, I have employed qualitative research methods such as (driven) conversations, observations, unstructured interviews (Fontana & Frey 2005: 705), as well as, more systematically, semi-structured interviews with *Italophone Somali diaspora* members. In most cases, questions and follow up questions have been answered within broader repeated interactions with interlocutors (also via phone, social media and email), which served as essential trust builders. Given the general state of fear and mistrust that pervades the Somali society, this exercise proved instrumental for enabling those “conversations”, while it assured, I believe, a certain level of reliability of the data.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, I have usually resorted to the classic interview, while interpreting and supplementing it with other more ethnographic forms of interaction, including narrative conversations, participation to events, contacts and exchanges of various nature, well beyond the mere scope of the research, and as a way to overcome the *language barrier* – Somali – on the one hand, as well as *social desirability*, *privacy*, *confidentiality* and *anonymity* issues on the other hand (Miles et al. 2014: 62).<sup>38</sup>

### *From Ethnography, to Conversations, to Semi-Structured Interviews*

Interviews and their variations have been the main research method of my project, though some clarifications are needed here. In the dominant understanding, by *Interview* we mean a kind of asymmetric setting, where the Interviewer asks questions to the Interviewee; a form of one-way communication flow, spaced out by periodic questions. During this process the interviewee is aware of: (a) a certain *asymmetry*, or difference between him/her and the researcher, in terms of culture,

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<sup>37</sup> On many occasions I deliberately skipped the word ‘interview’ not to generate anxiety and alarm in my interlocutors.

<sup>38</sup> Self-imposed censure would have hindered and severely impaired access to the actual communication acts, their contents, and the communication flows, thus posing insurmountable validity issues. Of course to be asking, as I opted for, a member of the Somali Diaspora about what kind of message/s he tries to convey to his/her counterpart back home does not mean that such acts took actually place in the form and with the contents that are claimed. The same applies to the claimed impacts in the home context and within the target audiences. However, such a risk can be extended to the entire field of social research based on interviews, which is always and inevitably a mediated and sometimes meditated views on the world of practice (see Kvale & Brinkmann 2009).

power, and background (b) a certain *distance* between him/her as the subject of the study, and the researcher as the observing part, the ‘scientist’ (experimental dimension); (c) the *formality* of the situation.

Along my research project I have strived for a softer and more nuanced form of interviewing. Basically I have tried to reduce three functions: (a) the asymmetry of the relationship; (b) the distance between the observer and the observed (the experimental dimension); (c) and the formality of the situation or setting. In general, I started with communicating with the members of the Diaspora, getting them to know each other, and the reasons for my research. This took the form of informal conversations and, whenever possible, of ethnographic research. For instance, walking, drinking coffees, going to events, or sitting at the same table for lunch, with members of the Somali ‘community’ in Florence, London, or Bonn. This process took place in relationship to the ‘community’ as a whole, but mostly individually, and every time in different degrees.

This was not only a preliminary step but a recurring behaviour. Along the way I often resorted to narrative interviews, or even better said, to narrative conversations. I tried to engage in a kind of more symmetric and equal relationship – with all the advantages that this can have in terms of disclosed contents – by taking turns in the conversation, and showing a strong listening capacity. When this resulted in discussing irrelevant subjects or aspects for the research, it took me a good deal of patience and management skills in order to readdress the conversation towards the research’s scope, but it was in general very worth the effort.

It is within this kind of on-going, recurring, and circular communication process that I managed to ask my questions – the questions that constitute the real focus of my research, and that are listed in the classic semi-structured interview guide (Annex I). But it would have been inappropriate, self-limiting, and counter-productive to ask them straightforwardly, one by one as they appear listed, while immediately rushing to non-pondered conclusions and misinterpretations. Trust and the willingness to disclose more private, intimate, and personal views visibly rose as the process advanced.

### *Interviewing strategies*

Hence, my semi-structured interviews, comprising a list of open-ended questions, did not just take place once and for all at a given time and place. They took place along the process, on several sites of knowledge production. As pointed out above, along the way I worked towards: (a) reducing the asymmetry of the power relations between me and my research participants/interviewees, be it to

mine or to their advantage; (b) move away from that kind of ‘anthropological’ or ‘experimental’ attitude towards the subject of the study; (c) overcome the formality of the situation. How?

(a) This process was driven by the idea of equalizing as much as possible the amount of knowledge about Somali issues and affairs that both my interlocutor and I could share. Knowledge is power. While getting to know my participants, their profile, aspirations, and recurring themes, I also disclosed mine along with my understanding of Somali issues. This proved an extremely effective method in order to set up a more equal relationship. By sharing knowledge, points of view, and opinions, I gained some kind of *legitimacy* in engaging in the context and advocating for my research purposes, whose relevance became more and more a shared conviction. Together with my interlocutors I discussed the facts of the day, the news, and the upcoming events relating to Somalia. Within this framework the Somali issues lost the prerogative of being just *their business*, they became *our common arena*. My research problems – and questions – became also theirs, which also confirmed the social – if not academic – relevance of what I was investigating. As a result I started to be perceived as an insider or half-insider, instead of a mere outsider. Of course this process was generally successful, but in various degrees, and with some disappointing exceptions. In any case that asymmetry, in all its possible declinations, was somehow levelled out.

(b) My goal was to discard that kind of *developmental* and *anthropological gaze* (Escobar 2011, Lewis D. 2005, Mosse 2005) that is very peculiar of the Western world when conducting research on foreign cultures and people. I was not interested in Somalis’ issues for some exotic, philatelic, or alarmist security-driven concerns.<sup>39</sup> I was interested in the Somalis as the living agents, contributors, and participants of my/our study, not as mere objects of study. I was interested in the relevance of the Somali diaspora members today at the crossroads between their past and their future, sending and receiving contexts, tradition and modernity, to use some simplifications. The very fact that their history was and still is deeply intertwined with mine – as an Italian – contributed to shorten this distance. Italy’s colonial past and involvement in Somalia is still a neat memory among the older generations, for good or bad. And it is to their merit and memory that I have come to appreciate this aspect more and deeper than I used to. More in general, being aware of the fact that we live in a global world, where Diaspora and transnational issues play a vital, ever growing role, further reduced the perceived distance. The Somali Diaspora is a living body of individuals, instances, and issues scattered all over the geographical map, including Italy and the Western world. While studying these issues I

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<sup>39</sup> See most of the Academic and Media appetite for Somalia absorbed by Al-Shabaab, Terrorism, Failed State, and Pirates.

made it clear that I was also studying myself, my past, my possible future, and the relationship with this body, the space in-between. The ‘we’ and ‘us’ of this global village, of these global agent, of the total history we share.

(c) The interaction with my interlocutors was not limited to a single Interview, with capital I, but encompassed a given number of interviews, in small case, several contact points or sites of knowledge production. This inevitably engendered familiarity and confidence between the parts - the peers - and eased communication between them. The whole process was not a way to copy, steal, or take away a piece of information from a body of knowledge and paste it into another, from theirs to mine. The interview process realised as a two way communication flow, as a giving and a receiving experience, that took place on several occasions. I mitigated the hegemonic role played by the interview by resorting to email exchanges, written feedback to oral questions, and follow up discussions, in order to address the core of my research questions. In some cases, all this was preceded by phone calls, and oral contacts of various types (Skype contacts, Whatsapp calls, Viber calls, etc.). Similarly it was also usually followed by exchanges of various nature, and an on-going debate, conducted orally or in writing. By virtue of this, the formality associated to the idea of ‘being interviewed’ almost dissolved, it succumbed to the idea that prevailed of ‘re-searching together’. As a consequence of this we approached, reached, and discussed the core of the issues stage after stage. In this sense the research methodology shows some level of affinity with Participatory Research – research *participants* rather than *subjects*, research *with* the people rather than *on* the people, knowledge for action, research as a source of social change, the concept of “safe space” for disclosing views (Bergold 2012, Tadevosyan and Schoenhuth 2011) - although the research design and implementation cannot be considered as such. I will discuss this point more indepth in the section on “Pragmatism and ‘Grounded’ Data Analysis”.

## **Trust Issues**

The Somali people have been through a very tough history, which has inevitably contributed to shaping their mindset towards the *foreigner*, as well as internal threats and outsiders (Bulhan, 2013a: 71). In the last 65 years they have experienced the alleged demise of colonialism, 21 years of dictatorship, over 20 years of civil war, generalised destruction, fear, death, lack of reliable institutions, feuds, militia and warlords governance, the surge of radical Islam and of religious conservatism,

endless clan rivalries, and conflict. In other words, they have often experienced the mutilation of their self, of their liberties, and of their (extended) families; witnessing murders and slaughter, directly from the field, or from afar, in the Diaspora. All of this has to be read in combination with troubled, often misplaced and ineffective international interventions, from neighbouring countries as well as from international organisations.<sup>40</sup>

As a result of this, and of the pervasive state of fear I have registered among my interlocutors on account of a new dominant – or apparently dominant – religious culture, the encounter with the unknown and the other, is somehow troublesome in Somalia and for Somalis; more than it is *per se*. This encounter is usually embedded in a permanent state of alert and suspiciousness with which any outsider, any non-member of the family, of the clan, of the religious affiliation, of the diasporic community, or any *other* human being is often perceived as a potential threat to the Somalis' safety and security, in all their variations. The borders of this distrustful state of being are fuzzy and variable, depending on the situation, the context, and the issues at stake.

Going hand in hand with this feeling I have noted is the generalised presumption of a hidden agenda, a vested interest, or benefit behind any form of involvement in Somali affairs. As one Somali has put it “if you are doing this research, there must be money involved, you must be doing it on behalf of someone, or else you are a spy. Many Somali would not believe that you are doing it just for the sake of research, of finding out the truth”. Sadly, on more than one occasion, these type of remarks were recorded, or shared with me, albeit in a *reassuring* tone. They maybe corresponded to the very popular and diffuse belief – about *other Somalis* – that their culture and spirit is now completely corrupted, and “nobody is willing to do anything anymore if not for money or strong compensation”.

I had to come to terms with this general – and sometimes justified – attitude while trying to gain the trust of my interviewees. How?

1. *Research project's background.* In general, during our first meeting, I made the scope of my investigation sound and clear, such as the reasons for my research and its funding. I was also explicit about the monetary value of my scholarship. I wanted my interlocutors to figure out what *my benefits* were in this entire story, and that I was not “making money out of their tragedies”.

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<sup>40</sup> These have taken the form of military and ‘humanitarian’ interventions (UNOSOM I & II, UNITAF & Restore Hope, Ethiopia’s military intervention, AMISOM), political mediation attempts (promoted by Kenya, Djibouti, IGAD, GCC, UN, etc.), or development assistance projects (funded by the EU and UN System, Gulf Countries, Italy, China, Turkey, UK, etc.) upon which the various Somali transitional governments and the current ones have extensively relied.

2. *Their perception about me.* Sometimes I openly discussed this issue with my interviewees, asking their perception about me, what they thought about my research, and if they thought I had any hidden goal beyond the professed one. I was not interested in convincing them of the *bona fide* of my intentions, it sufficed to open up the discussion.

3. *Taping as recording?* For the reasons given above, most of my interviewees refused to be taped in the first place. While attempting to drive their attention on delicate, sometimes even sensitive topics, memories, or stories, they looked at the electronic device, those rare times I dared to show it, with evident surprise, unease, and a slight touch of fear. I too felt uncomfortable in suggesting the possibility to tape their voice and their words, while asking for their permission to use the sound recorder. It was like distrusting them in that precise moment I was asking them to trust me: like if, while I was asking for permission to access the intimacy of their thoughts and feelings, I was violating that intimacy with a tool potentially menacing re-production and dissemination of those very feelings. A perspective this one that is not very suitable for things and stories received almost in the form of confession and intimate revelations. The sound recorder set us immediately apart, asymmetrically, and resulted in a discomfiting presence, that disrupted what I was trying to achieve: a closer and more reassuring relationship where my respondents could dare to open up.

4. *Field Notes.* After a few initial, as much as clumsy attempts, I desisted altogether from using 'technology' and put the sound recorder back again. I always and solely resorted to *field notes* as a way to record our conversations and interviews (Dick 2000:7). I strived to reproduce them almost word for word, as loyally and accurately as possible, apart from when the communication flows ran on different channels (emails) or shifted onto irrelevant subjects. In the subsequent meetings with new and *old* interviewees, I never mentioned the issue again. Of course this all had an impact on data collection modalities, the quality of the transcriptions, and the contents exchanged. If, on the one hand, I was losing in re-production quality standards of what "*had been said*", jotted down in field notes, and then transcribed into texts, I was sure I was gaining the trust of my interlocutors. This visibly impacted the level of in-depth, sensitiveness, and validity of the information disclosed.

5. *Assurance of confidentiality.* I always stated clearly the confidentiality with which I would have treated my respondents' information, while I gave individual assurances of anonymity. Since the first meeting it was obvious that nothing gathered during the research would have been reproduced nor published – for any research purpose - under their name. Reactions to my assurances were diverse: many agreed with a certain ill-dissimulated relief, sometimes mixed with persistent scepticism; some decided to open up and disclose their stances, expressively requiring further assurance to omit any personal detail

or information that could have exposed or helped to identify them; some others received the message and, without any particular reaction, did not manifestly change their behaviour or what they had to say; finally, there were those who reacted by stating clearly that they had nothing to hide, and that their public stances corresponded to their private beliefs (just a few and in very few occasions actually). However, to them all the same approach was applied: confidentiality throughout this dissertation.

6. *Long term research participants.* As a corollary of the issues, the strategies, and the decisions taken above, I actually engaged in on-going, open-ended, and recurring *research dialogues* with my interviewees. My relationship with the research project's participants was not a disposable one, apart from when they refused or declined to further proceed and *work* together. The research process was actually conducted *with* them, reflecting, as much as possible, individual features, pace, trust variables, and the like. We did not meet, call, or write just once. Ours was not a *one-use and go* kind of connection. In line with some of the precepts of Participatory Research (see above) I tried and managed – most of the time – to build up long and sometimes still standing *research bonds* with my interviewees/participants. This has been a way to circumvent and overcome the issue of trust.

7. *Interview staged approach.* As already stated on several occasions, I did not 'interview' my research participants just once. By a *staged approach* I mean that my research participants responded to my research questions, and their operationalisation, gradually, along a process whereby they have been accompanied to the core of the issues under investigation.

8. *Restitution and going back.* Rather than a planned strategy this approach emerged as a viable way to come to terms with my otherness and my being an outsider, a stranger, a potential enemy or spy. I never gave them the impression (tried not to) that I could run away with what they had just told me, and sell it to the first religious affiliate, opposing party, enemy, or clan. I went back, I fixed a follow-up appointment, I called back, and asked about their on-going issues. They could track me down and get back to me anytime. As a result, in many cases, the participants to this research have contributed also as informants. I asked for their advice, I compared ideas, opinions, and interpretations with a view to re-construct that complex social reality they/we lived in. It was and still is an on-going dialogue, which did not start or concluded in a precise moment. Interviews were part of this process of knowledge sharing and progressive convergence towards a mutual understanding of the social reality (Figueroa et al. 2002). This aspect links very much to the general Epistemological considerations that underpin the research.

## Pragmatism & ‘Grounded’ Data Analysis

Borrowing from Kvale & Brinkmann (2009: 47) the metaphor of the Interviewer as a *Traveller* or as a *Miner* - in relation to conceptions of knowledge in a postmodern age - I look at myself rather as a combination of the two: “In the *traveller metaphor* the interviewer is a traveller on a journey to a distant country that leads to a tale to be told upon returning home”, whereas in the miner metaphor the Interviewer is “a miner who unearths knowledge”, which is “understood as a buried metal”. In the carrying out of my research I have indirectly conversed about truth and reality with my interviewees, with a view to unearth their real thoughts and inclinations about it, while attempting to re-construct that reality as the sum of its parts, or as the sum of its individual social constructions, to find a middle ground between positivism and postmodernism (Charmaz 2000: 250, 273; Charmaz 2006, Figueroa et al. 2002: 4). The idea(l) was to approximate reality, the complexity of points of view, of local contexts, to *relativise* and put into a context or a frame the individual perspective on knowledge, or what was believed to be absolutely true. As both authors put it “knowledge is perspectival” (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009: 52).

Along similar lines, the authors propose two types of travellers, the *pilgrim* on a long search for truth, and the *tourist* shopping for experiences. While conducting this research I have travelled to, thanks to my interviewees, new fields of knowledge, new landscapes. Along the way, the geography of my knowledge has changed, has expanded, has embraced new stances, concepts, and perspectives. I do not think that the process is over, or that there is a technical end to it, but this does not mean that the gathered knowledge cannot approximate an *existing human* or *inter-human reality*. In other words, if in a postmodern epistemology, knowledge is a matter of conversation between persons, and “exists in the relationship between persons and world”, I posit that the knowledge produced through interviews is an approximation of this actual relationship. To use a mathematical language I would say that the reality in or out there is the limit to the function of knowledge.

This conception is very close to that typical of *Pragmatism*, whose central view is “that language and knowledge do not copy reality but are means of coping with a changing world” (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009: 51). As a matter of fact the present research is inspired by pragmatism, in lower case this time. The ultimate goal of this investigation is not only to approximate reality, and its current trends, but also to provide guidance for acting and interacting with that reality. As Pragmatists emphasize the primacy of practice and the use-value of ideas, my greatest attention is devoted to the practical aspects and implications of the research, for the world of policy. Kvale & Brinkmann list 7

characteristics about *Interview Knowledge*, among them *Knowledge as Pragmatic* “When human reality is understood as conversation and action, knowledge becomes the ability to perform effective actions”, and the debate about true knowledge is replaced by the debate about useful knowledge (2009: 56). One of the main drivers of this project has been the attention to these pragmatic aspects, in line with some of the main tenets of the Participatory Research Approach (Bergold 2012, Tadevosyan and Schoenhuth 2011), and with the precepts, from the world of practice, of Participatory Communication Research (Nyamnjoh 2010, Figueroa et al. 2002, Servaes 1996). This research project is meant to be applied research, to understand social reality from ordinary’s people perspective, to make their reality count.<sup>41</sup>

## Research Methodology

As already stated, the way I have designed or just combined tools, methods, and theoretical frameworks for the purpose of knowledge production, is consistent with the main tenets of the Grounded Theory (GT) (Glaser & Strauss 1967, Corbin & Strauss 2008), especially in the constructivist understanding put forward by Charmaz (2000, 2006). As anticipated at the beginning of this chapter, if Communication for Social Change, Social Remittance Theory, and Somali (Development) Studies have provided for a general framework of understanding, they have not for this reason pre-determined the testing or the production of knowledge based on pre-established framework of analysis. For sure these disciplines have constituted a way of seeing: a form of guidance and direction in the way data have been collected, selected (selective coding), and analysed. As much as my interview questions might have been flexible and open to new developments they also inevitably reflected a focus, which was represented by the investigation of a (possible) process of social change. Moreover, while looking at my data, and analysing them, through the classical coding (first and second cycle) and memoing stages (analysis notes), special attention has been devoted to the communicative aspects, being DevComm and CfSC, among others, the general disciplines to which this research is meant to contribute. Yet, it is also true that as I progressed with data collection and analysis, I was

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<sup>41</sup> The reason for this kind of approach lies most probably in my background. I have spent several years working in the Development cooperation sector, providing technical assistance to developing countries while training the personnel of international missions. It is this kind of posture, a sound understanding of its inherent limits, and the attempt to overcome them that back the design of this project.

actually predominantly confronted with the unexpected, the unforeseen, and the unpredictable. The way I have carried out my interviews, as discussed above, has been conducive to progressive level of in-depth and insights. As a result, I started to look at my data, not only in the attempt to find an answer to my research questions, but also listening to what these data had to tell me. Indeed, my code list only marginally – and ex-post - reflects categories and themes typical of the discipline recalled above. *De facto* I adopted an open coding approach that gave way to selective coding (focused, axial, pattern, and theoretical coding), more in line with GT as understood by Glaser and then Charmaz, rather than as put forward by Strauss and Corbin. Be how it may this research project has to be understood at the cross-roads between Grounded Theory on the one hand and a more general Qualitative Data Analysis methodology on the other.

### **Somali Diaspora Members with an Italian Background: the Target Population**

The target population from which my sample was drawn were older generations of diaspora Somalis who are or were, at one time or another, based in Italy or Europe, aged 50 years old and older, and with a good level of Italian deriving from some sort of Italian background (mostly educational).

The first term – or combination of terms - that defines my target population is represented by “*Somali Diaspora*”. The first conceptual challenge of the present research has been to define what qualify as Diaspora. Various definitions exist of Diaspora. If they have a trait in common is the fact that they have evolved over the time, reflecting an ever-changing reality. The concept that today we have of Diaspora is very different from the biblical concept of the Israelites and their forced exile during the Babylonian Captivity. One of the most spread and widely used definition is Safran’s, from 1991.<sup>42</sup> Kevin Kenny, Professor of History at Boston College and author of *Diaspora: A Very Short Introduction*, adopts a more nuanced definition, while pointing out at the importance of the idea of movement, connectivity, and return, as a common denominator of all Diasporas ever since the 1960s.

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<sup>42</sup> Paraphrasing Safran (1991:83-84), the notion of Diaspora is defined as expatriate minority communities that share several of following characteristics: 1) dispersal from an original ‘centre’ or homeland; 2) a collective memory or myth about the homeland; 3) the experience of partial alienation in the host society; 4) an idea of eventual return to the homeland; 5) collective commitment to the maintenance of the homeland; 6) continued relations with the homeland and solidarity as well as an ‘ethnocommunal consciousness’ between the scattered populations.

Owing to the fact that all Diasporas are a bit similar and a bit different at the same time, it would be worth here to focus on what is relevant for the Somali Diaspora. By combining Kenny's and Safran's criteria, Diasporas' general attributes can be listed as follow:

- 1) the dispersal from an original Homeland (Somalia as a whole in this case);
- 2) the collective or individual commitment to the maintenance of this Homeland;
- 3) an idea of eventual return to the Homeland;
- 4) continued relations with the Homeland and solidarity among its members in the Diaspora.

Yet, some distinctions and adjustments are needed here. If point 1) is unquestionably a common trait among the Somali Diaspora, points 2), 3), and 4) are experienced at collective as well individual level in various degrees, forms, and not necessarily always combined together. Salience and size of individual commitments surpass very often the communal consciousness. The members of the Somali Diaspora are committed to many Somalias, not just one, each one reflecting their order of priority, their system of values, and mindsets. Being able to look at *home* from a Diasporic perspective is very often an extremely pleasing and empowering idea, the idea of being able to shape and reshape *home* according to one's own individual rather than collective experiences. An idea that is conducive to the temptation of acting, possibly, in the image and likeness of one's own ideals and understanding.

Moreover, I put forward the introduction – as an addition or juxtaposition - of another concept that proves particularly appropriate in the Somali context. I maintain the need to place the word *Clan* next to the concept of Homeland, or Country. I am not going to engage in a discussion about the role played by the Clan system and its affiliations in the Somali context, as a source of mobility and mobilisation (Laitin and Samatar 1987; Lewis 1991, 2002, 2008; Bulhan 2009, Kapteijns 2013). More simply, I just highlight the necessity to bear it in mind, as an explanatory variable, while dealing with Somali issues.

Summing up and readjusting the concept, for the purposes of this study, a member of the *Somali Diaspora* is someone:

- a) who has experienced the *dispersion* or just the relocation from Somalia;
- b) who feels attached, if not committed – although not necessarily – to the *maintenance* of its homeland, clan, region, or community;

- c) who plans or just caresses the idea of *returning* back home eventually, or who actually never completely departed from it. S/he lives in a transnational space and circular dimension where s/he feels somehow comfortable in the co-existence of possibilities (return, non-return, circularity);
- d) who experiences continued *relations* and contacts with her/his group of peers, family, clan members, religious affiliates, in the Diaspora and/or back home etc.

Based on criterion a) I am not including in my study those Diaspora members who were born in the Diaspora. Not because they do not belong to the Diaspora *per se*, but because they are less relevant for the research question, and even less relevant within the Italian context, for the reasons that will become clear in the course of this research.

The second term – or combination of terms – that defines my target population is represented by the “*Italian Background*”. Now, in order to identify my would-be group of relevant interviewees I combined the concept of Diaspora member with this cultural (identity) dimension.<sup>43</sup> It is worth underlining again though, that this possibility was not planned nor expected during the first design of my research project. In other words, I in the first place, ignored the importance and the relevance of the Italian background among older generations of Somalis until today. It only emerged along the data collection phase.

Many Somalis in the Diaspora claim in fact a still vivid cultural connection with Italy, at least with regards to their experience of formal education. Many among them had reached Italy during the Siad Barre regime, if not before, more often than not on educational or military training programmes. Many had attended as pupils and students the education system that the Italians set up in Somalia during the *Amministrazione Fiduciaria Italiana* (AFIS 1950 – 1960) and later the Somali National University. Others were sent to Italy on scholarships or as a result of pre-WWII connections, business, and trades. Many others, instead, left Somalia and relocated to a more peaceful and democratic context - Italy among other countries - while fleeing the misdeeds of the military regime, or while looking for a remedy to the outbreak of the civil war in 1991.<sup>44</sup> In any case most of these Somalis had received an education

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<sup>43</sup> I will expand further on Safran’s definition in light of this cultural component in Chapter 4, when discussing the “Italophone Somali Diaspora: Background and Italian Influences”.

<sup>44</sup> More in particular, within the Italian context, the epithet *Vecchia Lira* – “Old Lira” in English - is used to indicate Somali older generations with a strong cultural bond or proximity with the former colonial power, Italy. The nickname is intentionally playful while it refers to the old currency in use in Italy prior to 2001. As a matter of fact, 2001 works as a watershed, a divide between older and newer generations. The former have come by plane and usually belong or used to belong to that cultural élite with an Italian background, whereas the latter have come by boat and reflect motivations and dynamics of more contemporary migratory flows.

in Italian, be it in Somalia or in Italy. Often they can fluently speak the Italian language, sometimes even superlatively. They are familiar with the Italian role in Somalia, in all its colonial and post-colonial endeavours.<sup>45</sup> I will discuss more in depth these aspects in Chapter 5, when delving into the Italian influence and the “Italian background”.

This cultural proximity does not necessarily mean that their location in the Diaspora today is Italy or, for those who have already returned back to Somalia, that it has been Italy. If it has been so, at least for a certain period, many among them, in the last 20 years, have relocated to other European countries moving away from Italy, to the north of Europe (UK, Germany, Sweden, Finland, Netherlands, etc.). However, their geographic location in the (European) Diaspora is actually quite irrelevant. The focus here is on their Italian cultural ties and bonds, in the form of language skills, memories, education, and similar. Among Somali older generations, the Italian culture remains often one of the most familiar, and it is perceived as such by many of them irrespective of their country of residence today. During their communications, across countries and transnational communities, Italian often remains the language of affectation.

Of course, this cultural proximity with the subjects of my investigation has worked as an important access gate, a unique entry point, which facilitated access to their social, and maybe private sphere: in terms of contacts, quality of communication, mutual recognition, and sometimes even friendship, across two cultures that in many cases are perceived as bridged and as (still) sharing something in common. The implications of all this for the purpose of the present research and the quality of the data are undoubtedly as far reaching as much as hardly assessable.

Hence, once ascertained its qualification as a Diaspora member, I included the potential participants into my sample according to a supposed Italian background, for which I considered a proxy (a) the capacity to speak Italian, their being *Italophone*, alone or in combination with: (b) some sort of Italian background in the form of (formal) education experiences, in Somalia or in Italy; (c) perceived and still somehow *honoured* cultural ties with Italy. In other words, I did not adopt a strict Diaspora country based approach in the studying of the Somali Diaspora, but rather a national-cultural and language approach in determining if a member of the Somali Diaspora also qualified as *Italophone* – as Italian speaking - *Somali diaspora* member.

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<sup>45</sup> Among them, quite a few express their disappointment for how they feel to have been abandoned to their destiny, as a country and as a generation. Despite everything, many among them still placed some hopes in the former coloniser for the good of their own country (with all due exceptions of course).

### *Western based Diaspora, Middle East Diaspora, and African Diaspora*

The exchange of social remittances and communication flows to and from the mythical homeland vary across Diaspora communities, based on different variables (hosting culture, community life, individuals, religious variables, gender issues, among others). Above all, the ‘cultural’ location, and the hegemonic forms of the culture in that given space and community, are of course extremely relevant. To be studying the nature and quality of these processes from a European and Italian perspective can lead to completely different results than by adopting a Middle East or African perspective for instance. Locally dominant and non-dominant, preserved, adopted, and renegotiated values, norms, and behaviours differ *geo-culturally* across Diaspora communities. Limits to generalisability and the representativeness of the present study are to be borne in mind before attempting any rushed conclusion or absolute statement. However, as I will show in the course of this dissertation, the process or social remittance within my target population occurs more over time - *cultural time-zone* - rather than over space.

### *Initial, Theoretical, and Purposive Sampling, plus Snowballing*

For the purposes of this research, and towards matching the need to gain a representative sample, I relied on previous mappings of the Somali Diaspora, stemming from the academic and the policy world alike (Hammond 2011). Building upon them, I developed the following *categorisation* of the Diaspora members in relation to their location and transnational movement over time. Basically all members of the Somali Diaspora fall in one or the other of the following sub-groups:

1. *Permanent Diaspora*: those (Italoophone) Somali Diaspora members who are fully based abroad, in the Diaspora, in a Western context (Italy but also other countries), and from there nurture their relationships with relatives, peers, clan members, and religious affiliates back home. These relationships can be of various degrees and intensity, but rarely are completely absent.
2. *Transitory Diaspora*: those (Italoophone) Somali Diaspora members who move back and forth between their location in the Diaspora (in a Western context) and the centre of their interest in Somalia. Be it their properties and belongings, their businesses, and the activities that they run and manage across time and space.

3. *Returnees*: those (Italoophone) Somali Diaspora members that after having spent a good deal of time in the Diaspora, and maybe in an Italian context among others, have decided to relocate back to Somalia, and keep pursuing their activities, interests, passions from there, from *back home*.

In the course of my research I have combined this form of *initial* sampling – “sampling to reflect population distributions” (Charmaz 2006:100) - with *purposive sampling* and *snowballing*. Once I had identified the sub-groups within which my research candidates had to be picked up, I *selected* them purposively or they *self-selected* themselves, as the work progressed, based on their suitability for the study and willingness to engage with the research. In other words I have considered the capacity to engage on those on-going dialogues that have been at the core of my methodological approach as a minimum requirement. The other main selection criterion has been their capacity to exchange this information in Italian: that is another form of theoretical sampling as emerged from the study (Charmaz 2006:96).

Additionally, building upon pre-existent acquaintances and recently acquired contacts among permanent Diaspora members based in Italy (in Florence in particular), I gained access to further relevant connections, as in a *snowballing* effect, both within (European) diaspora communities and returnees. This enabled me to reach out to other relevant contacts in the field which otherwise would have been very difficult to identify and access. Introduced by their acquaintances and friends, I could count on a trustworthy business card that allowed me to pursue my research. I also found out, to my great surprise, that most Somalis of the Diaspora, at least those belonging to a certain élite, are often familiar with each other: they know or have heard of each other, at least among the older generations. A by-product maybe of the still strong oral dimension of the Somali culture, this is undoubtedly also a sign of a shared social and cultural capital, which in turn is one of the main aspects defining the target population here under investigation. I literally bumped into a web of international, transnational, and diasporic relations, to which I was somehow exposed and in part introduced. What I experienced was just the tip of an iceberg I suppose.

### *Interviewees and Informants*

In the end, I conducted interviews and conversed with a total of 30 research participants: 17 permanent diaspora members, 5 transitory diaspora members (people periodically travelling to Somalia from their location in the diaspora), and 8 returnees to Somalia. In gender terms, they were 10 women and 20 men. Another 8 interviews were not used in the final process of data analysis because

incomplete, of poor quality, or proving scarcely relevant for the research questions. As said, all interviews were conducted in **Italian**, a methodological opportunity that was not planned, nor taken for granted in the beginning.

A combination of initial sampling (permanent, transitory, returnees, clan affiliations, male and female) and, as the research unfolded, theoretical sampling (Italian language skills), purposive sampling (ability and willingness to engage with the research in a substantial way), and snowballing served as techniques for sample selection. In the end, interviewees averaged between 50 and 70 years old, with only a couple of exceptions (30-40). Predominantly originating from South-Central Somalia or Puntland (only 2 from Somaliland), they represented all main clan affiliations. Moreover, with just one exception (confessional education only), they all had a good level of 'formal' education, at least at secondary (8 cases), if not graduate (12 cases), or post-graduate level (9 cases, including 5 PhD holders).<sup>46</sup> Finally, as already pointed out, good Italian language skills, be they developed in Somalia or in the Diaspora, have also worked as a criterion for sample identification and self-selection.<sup>47</sup>

More in general, I have complemented these research data with extensive conversations and exchanges with a rich group of informants from both the Italian and the Somali communities (another 25 people).

## **Data Analysis**

As extensively discussed in the preceding sections, interview and field notes have been the main source of texts of the present work. As said I could not tape my interviewees during our one to one sessions. Hence, I always resorted to notes that I took simultaneously to the act of communication (Dick 2000:7). In most cases they were interview notes from sessions held in-person, and, in another number of cases, tele-sessions - held through computer or phone communication (Skype, WhatsApp, Viber), especially when interviewing returnees. In some other cases, they have been complemented with written communications via email. In line with Diamond (1992:7) I would say that also in my case

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<sup>46</sup> Education degrees at graduate and post graduate level seem to be almost the prerogative of men. The women of my sample are distributed across level of education in this way: 1 Confessional School, 5 Secondary, 2 Graduate, and 2 Post-Graduate (MA).

<sup>47</sup> After a first round of interviews I realised the possibility to conduct them directly in Italian. Hence, afterwards, I started to look for diaspora Somalis with a reasonable understanding of this language. Those who did not feel comfortable, or not in a position, to handle an interview (conversation) in Italian - very few actually (in 2-3 cases) - desisted from the project altogether.

“[t]he basic data are... the actual words of the people reproduced to the best ability from the field notes”. My data are notes gathered during the interview process and then transcribed in the form of *texts*: as Schutt puts it, “the data for qualitative study most often are notes jotted down in the field and during an interview” (2011:326).

### *Interview Notes ‘Transcription’ & Texts*

Apart from when communications occurred in writing – directly taking the form of *texts* (emails),<sup>48</sup> I was confronted with the need to ‘transcribe’ and render in prose – in themes - a conversation that had only been sketched and jotted down in notes. In other words I had to produce *texts* from notes. Towards avoiding or mitigating the side-effects of a process that is potentially prone to manipulations and bias, I adopted following strategies:

1. Rendered texts from interview notes immediately after the interview took place or in the following hours;
2. Used key words to recall entire concepts or phrases;
3. Used abbreviations to save time while taking notes;
4. Asked for pauses in the respondent communication flow for taking notes timely enough;
5. Asked the respondent for repetition whenever needed;
6. Reread the single piece of information in light with the overall sense and context of the exchange;
7. Went back to my interlocutor with restitution, follow-up questions, and requests for clarifications during continued interactions.

In the end, I produced 30 files of text, one for each research participant, listing all possible interactions I had with him/her on all possible media, chronologically ordered. Length and density of these files is variable, reflecting a number of interactions that was variable, also in consideration of, for each interlocutor: loquacity, location, easiness of access and communication, time at disposal, interest for the research, willingness or eagerness to approach the research questions at different level of in-depth. In some cases this file exceeded the 9.000 words all in all (9.473), while on average, for each research participant it was around 3-4.000 words. Considering all files together the total amount of text that I used for the purposes of the analysis is around 100.000 words.

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<sup>48</sup>This was the case in a minority of cases, especially in the form of follow-up questions, updates, or requests of clarification once the main sessions had taken place.

### *Interview Notes Analysis and Grounded Theory*

The texts produced as described above have been analysed through the use of Atlas.ti software, with which I have familiarised with the assistance of extensive literature (Schutt 2011, Friese 2012, 2014). I have coded my data adopting a “versus coding” approach, which I found the best match for the appreciation of a process of social change contended, or opposed, among different stakeholders (Saldaña 2016:137). Yet, the process of data analysis has been gradual. I proceeded by successive approximation from a first level of coding, whereby I have thematically split my data into isolated, self-standing, and coherent chunks of meaning, and then moved to the second level of coding (Saldaña 2016). At this stage I have regrouped those chunks of meaning along patterns, ideas, categories, and overarching categories, up to central or core categories into which my research has culminated (Saldaña 2016, Miles et al. 2014, Charmaz 2006).

All in all the texts above have resulted in: 1.945 quotations, organised in 150 relevant codes – selective or focused coding (Charmaz 2006:57). They were 272 in total, but not all of them proved relevant for the data analysis process. I grouped these codes together under core-categories (Current State of Affairs at Inner and Outer Level, Ideals of Social Change at Inner and Outer Level, Stakeholders, and Processes) and sub-categories (27 in total). Moreover, in parallel, research participants’ profile has been associated to various families (gender, diaspora type - location in the Diaspora or in Somalia - and clan family of belonging). This level of analysis has been complemented by 128 Memos (Saldaña 2016:43, Charmaz 2006:72) and 29 Networks Views (Friese 2014 : 219) with which I have first guessed, then supported, and finally strengthened the scrutinising of the data according to *the* theory that *emerged* from the data.

The framework I have come up with, resulting from these data, is a theory of social change suitable for the Somali context. As I will show in the next chapters, essentially social change is appreciated, from an Italoophone Somali diaspora perspective, as institutional change. This process is opposed though by various *forms of social control*, as I refer to them, and as I will discuss in detail in the course of this dissertation.

## Limitations

### *Reliability & Reflexivity*

Findings of the present study are repeatable, as long as the researcher manages to establish equivalent or comparable relationships with the research participants. I trust in other words to have been able to open up meaningful and frank communication channels with most of my research participants, which in turn has positively affected, I presume, the quality and the reliability of the data. As to the reflexivity issue, both as the effect of my presence on the research data and as the temptation to reflect pre-determined theoretical frameworks and “ways of seeing”<sup>49</sup> on my findings, I refer to Chapter 10 (section on “Challenges to the Research & Research Challenges”) and Chapter 2 respectively, as well as diffusely throughout the research.

### *Validity*

The attention that I devoted to the comparison, cross-checking, and restitution of the main findings of the present study to my research participants, asking as well for their validation, should in principle guarantee for the credibility of the research, at least internally. Needless to say, however, that the work is exposed to some external validity issues. I am referring to the extensively commented *selection and community bias* issue, along with the *wrong anchoring* issue, when it comes more in particular to the religious variables. I managed to compensate this, at least in part, by building upon my pre-existent knowledge of the Somali context and by further exploring available primary and secondary sources, including the (extremely scarce though) literature about my specific target population. I also complemented this knowledge with the support and the assistance of a large number of informants, both from the Somali and the Italian sides, a rich list of *ancien combattants*, experts, scholars, and eye witnesses of the Somalia of the last 50 years. Yet, I have enough reasons to believe that with regards to the religious aspects, I might have not been exposed to the full spectrum of positions as they happen to be found in my population of reference.<sup>50</sup> Some of the potential interlocutors I tried to get in contact with, although very limited in number, addressed only at first my invitations, showing scarce penetrability, whilst others declined solicitations and suggestions altogether. The picture I am

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<sup>49</sup> A tacit and indirect reference to John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin Books (1972).

<sup>50</sup> Quite revelatory is the quote at the beginning of the section on *Trust Issues* within this Methodological Chapter.

proposing here might reflect this shortcoming, making the conclusions I reach not entirely *generalisable* to all members of my target population, the Italoophone Somali diaspora.

Actually, I have extensively pondered this aspect as I progressed with the research project. I also contemplated in fact the opportunity to introduce in my theoretical sampling a *religious dimension*. It was proving more and more relevant, as the investigation progressed, in explaining or determining how the process of social change was envisaged and then communicated by the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora. However, the difficulty to accessing this kind of information, and the treacherous nature of some of its implications for the Somali diaspora abroad, as well as back home, and for the reasons that will become clear in the course of this dissertation, has been determinant in discarding this option. Nevertheless, all these considerations need to be borne in mind when assessing findings and conclusions stemming from the present research.

### *Generalisability*

For the reasons recalled above, findings and conclusions that I am putting forward with this study, might encounter some generalisability issues in comparison with wider ‘populations’. In light of what I have discussed and highlighted so far, possible limitations might descend from: a) a geo-cultural variable; b) a generational variable; c) a possible self-selection effect with regards to the religious perspective. From a) a geo-cultural perspective I have already stated the limits of this investigation, which for sure cannot be extended to the whole Somali Diaspora in the world, from the Middle East to Africa to Oceania. My target population, the Italoophone Somali diaspora is essentially European and Westernised. As to b) the generational variable, it is also true that the present investigation focuses for obvious reasons – Italoophone historically determined influence – on the older generations of Somalis, those approaching now 50 years of age and older. It would be for sure extremely interesting to be studying the same research questions with regards to the newer generations, although the Italoophone influence would not be minimally comparable. In reference instead to c) the possible self-selection effect it would be advisable to possibly introduce this variable in a follow-up research, and verify the holding of certain conclusions across religious affiliations.

## Chapter 4

# The Italophone Somali Diaspora: Background and Italian Influences

The last chapter laid out in detail the methodology of the book, focusing on the theory and research questions that guide the research. This chapter presents the historical background for the case study, focusing in particular on the Somali education sector. Specifically, it addresses the question of the development of Italian influence in this domain and Somali cultural life more generally—from the earliest days of colonial intervention to the present. It begins with a discussion of the Italian presence in the education sector. It then turns to discuss the development of the education sector (understood broadly) during Siad Barre’s rule, including the crucial role of the Somali National University (SNU). Finally, it focuses on education in the country today as it has evolved since the end of the civil war.

### The Italian Presence in the Education Sector

For good or ill when dealing with Somalia, Italy comes into play—or at least used to. Italy was the colonial power in the Italian Somaliland (1905–1941) and the UN-mandated power during the period of the Amministrazione Fiduciaria Italiana or AFIS (1950–1960). Italy’s juridical school also deeply inspired the drafting of the constitution of the newly independent state, the Somali Republic, which lasted during the period 1960–1969. Finally, the Italian government poured a considerable amount of money in the form of “development aid” into Somalia over the entire period from 1972 to 1991. These are the core pillars in a long relationship, which until recently—i.e., before the collapse of the state in the 1990s—Siad Barre himself defined as “special” [*speciale* in Italian] (Pacífico 1996).

Italians (Filonardi and Ferrandi, among others) were the first Europeans to explore the physical boundaries of what would become Somalia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In so doing, they undertook a project of “discovering” the territory, reporting on what they found, intensively studying local customs and traditions (Puccioni, Colucci, Cerulli), and marrying Somali women. They also launched all manner of projects in the territory, founding new settlements and agro-farms (Villaggio Duca degli Abruzzi—now renamed Johar—and Genale, among others), setting up companies and running businesses in

various sectors, including banana farming and fishing (Del Boca 1976–1984, Morone 2011a, Pandolfo 2013). Like any other colonial force in the modern era, the Italians disrupted local traditions and forms of governance, while adopting a modernization approach.

During this period, the Somalis became accustomed to the Italian presence, exposed as they were to the Italian culture, language, and political apparatus. On some accounts, until the outbreak of the civil war (1991) even in the remotest village there was always at least one elder or chief who could speak Italian (Cappelli, 2011: 80, Laitin 1977: 67–68). For visitors to the main market in Mogadishu, the *Bakaaraha*, who could not understand the Somali language, someone among the locals able to speak Italian—typically a youth or young adult—would be summoned to assist in the communication.<sup>51</sup> Somali women worked as *governanti* [domestic workers, *boyeeso* in Somali] for the Italian cooperation personnel, while the men—who were nevertheless referred to patronizingly as *boys*—were often employed as drivers and bodyguards (Petrucci 1993a, Sica 1994, Pacifico 1996).

We are talking, then, about almost a century of history, between the time the Italians first assumed governing control over the cities and of the ports of the Benaadir region from the Sultan of Zanzibar (Calchi Novati 1994, Lewis 2002, Pandolfo 2013) up until 1991. During this time, Italy’s cultural, political, and economic influence dominated, in comparison to that of other foreign countries. This seems to hold true at least within the boundaries of the old ‘Italian Somaliland’, in other words with the exception of current Somaliland.

How was this influence exercised? As mentioned, political and economic leverage played a crucial role. However, influence was also exercised in the educational and cultural sectors. Beyond the first colonial period, which led to the unification of the Horn of Africa under the Italian East Africa Empire (1936–1941)—comprising Ethiopia, current Eritrea, British Somaliland (from 1940), and Italian Somaliland—Italian education policy in the aftermath of WWII became more democratic and less discriminatory (Morone 2011b).

Between 1950 and 1960, Italy was, in fact, mandated to lead and guide Somalia towards independence under the terms of AFIS. This project, controlled remotely from Rome, saw only minimal investment in the education sector: the school system and the training of the future *quadri*, or managers of the state (Morone 2011b). Based on this mandate, Italy was supposed to address not only basic elementary education for all, but also to provide higher training for those bound to administer the newly independent Somalia in a few short years (Deplano 2014:335, Cassanelli and Abdikadir

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<sup>51</sup> Interview with Antonio Cappelli, who lived in Somalia continuously for almost 20 years, between 1973 and 1990.

2008:95). Investments were made not only in developing the Somali school system but also in a considerable scholarship programme for university education or other professional training directly in Italy.

Lewis himself recognizes the “groundwork for progress” that the Italians “firmly established [...] in the field of education” during the period of the Amministrazione Fiduciaria, through “an ambitious and imaginative scheme for general education” (Lewis 2002: 140). The Italian education plan focused mostly on two main measures. On the one hand, it provided access to (basic) education to a good deal of Somalis of school age; on the other, it offered scholarships for those willing to embark on higher education programmes directly on Italian soil. These included professional civilian qualifications as well as military or police training. The Italian administration eventually managed to set up an (almost) national education system that comprised elementary schools, secondary schools, vocational training, and, finally, higher education institutes. More data are available for the period 1950–1960 since the Italian mandated administration was required to report on the progress of this project to the United Nations. In 1960 there were 41 elementary schools, with 41,000 enrolled pupils, 14 Scuole Medie Inferiori (lower secondary schools), and a handful of secondary professional schools. There was also a higher institute for political–administrative career training, which was to become the Istituto Superiore and then later the School of Political Science—the nucleus of the future Somali National University (SNU)—established already in 1954 (Morone 2011b). To this list of schools, one should add all the religiously-run institutions, leftover from the previous colonial period, which continued to run under the auspices of the Christian missions in Somalia. Prominent examples include Monsignor Filippini’s co-educational school, the Collegio Nuova Somalia, or the schools of the Frati Minori revolving around the Cathedral and the Bishop of Mogadishu.

At the same time, the number of Somalis benefitting from study scholarships in Italy reached a total of 711 at the end of the mandate in 1960 (Deplano 2014), but this kind of policy continued well beyond—indeed, up until 1990. Not without reason, then, at least half of my interviewees went through some form of educational or vocational training in Italy itself, benefitting from direct government scholarships (or those funded through “aid” programmes). For the entire sample, their schooling experience in Somalia was often in the Italian language. This is well exemplified by some eminent (and not quite as eminent) individuals who all studied or were trained in Italy: Aden Abdhulla Osman (Somalia’s president, 1960–1967); Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke (Somalia’s president, 1967–1969); Siad Barre (Somalia’s president, 1969–1991); Mohamed Aden Sheikh (Minister of Health, Education, and Information, 1969–1973); Mohamed Yusuf Weyrah (Minister of Finance, 1970–1975); Mohamed

Warsame Ali “Chimico” (Somali diplomat and Minister from the 1960s to the 1980s); Mohamed Said Samantar “Ga’aliye” (Somali diplomat 1969–1981); Ismail Juma’ale Ossoble (Somali lawyer and human rights activist from the 1960s–1990); Warsame Abdhullahi “Indhole” (President of the Somali Cooperatives, 1978–1990). This is but a sample of the many Somali elites who went through “the system” over the long term.

In 1963, the reunited Somalia—comprising British Somaliland in the north-west and Somalia Italiana—opted for English as the language of instruction (Morone 2011b:91). However, the full implementation of this political decision took several years to accomplish and was more effective in the Anglophone part of the country (Cassanelli and Abdikadir 2008:97). In most cases, the school establishments of South–Central Somalia and current Puntland kept Italian as the de facto main language of access to formal education for many years (Eno et al. 2014:14). During this period—despite the fact that the AFIS mandate was over—Italian technical assistance to Somalia remained basically unchanged. Besides providing scholarships, teaching institutes, and teaching personnel, in April 1961, Italy signed a cultural exchange agreement with Somalia.<sup>52</sup> It established, for the two countries on an equal footing, the possibility to set up and maintain schools of various “*ordine e grado*” (levels) in the territory of the respective countries. This accord had no expiration date (Borgagna 2016).

During the Italian AFIS administration, with an overall population of 2,756,380 Somalis,<sup>53</sup> more than 40,000 students accessed formal education: 18,377 in primary schools and 22,657 in literacy courses for adults (Morone 2011b: 88). Some 2,790 attended lower secondary schools and a further 750 were enrolled in secondary schools.<sup>54</sup> Overall, more than 50,000 students were enrolled in confessional Quranic education. During these years, however, confessional Quranic education could only be considered a substitute for formal education, rather than as a complement to it. Cassanelli and Abdikadir (2008: 109) clearly indicate that the *dugsi* community schools provided only elementary-level education:

In the past, at the end of two or three years in the *dugsi*, the young Somali boy or girl was ready to move to a second learning level. This level provided either life-related learning experiences

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<sup>52</sup> *Accordo Culturale tra l’Italia e la Somalia*, Roma 26 Aprile 1961, in “Trattati tra l’Italia e la Somalia”, in *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali*, pp. 601-610, available at [ArcAdiA, Centro Studi Somali](#), retrieved 10 July 2018.

<sup>53</sup> Population Pyramids of the World, 1950-2100, available [here](#), retrieved 29 June 2018.

<sup>54</sup> Ministry of Information and National Guidance (1974b), *Notre Education Revolutionnaire*, Mogadishu, June 1974, pp. 15-24.

or a continuation of formal religious training that frequently required the student to leave his community.

## Siad Barre's Rule and the Aspirations for Higher Education

At the end of a decade of political and economic turmoil following Somalia's independence (1960), a new turning point in the project of modernization in Somalia occurred: the so-called "Second Revolution". The 1969 bloodless coup d'état carried out by the military placed Siad Barre, a former officer of the Italian police force in Somalia, as head of the Supreme Revolutionary Council. His military junta was assisted by a civilian cabinet made up of intellectuals and other mentors of the revolution, the so-called "*barbette*" ("goatees" in English)<sup>55</sup> many of whom boasted strong cultural bonds with Italy.<sup>56</sup>

The Second Revolution championed the idea of modernizing the country in many respects, while adopting "scientific socialism as a general ideological framework" (Laitin & Samatar, 1987:82). Detribalization and ad hoc sedentarization of the nomadic groups, nationalization of key sectors, irrigation works and anti-desertification measures were among the main long-term policies established in anticipation of the country's industrialization. The adoption of a written Somali language (1972), the setting up of the SNU (1973) and urban and rural mass literacy campaigns (1973, 1975) complemented this picture from an educational point of view (Cassanelli & Abdikadir 2008). Gender equality promotion addressed the question of the rights of women, culminating in the passage in 1975 of the Family Law, which "sought to establish women's equality in several areas, including inheritance and divorce" (Merryman 1996: 179).

The rhetoric of the Somali Youth League first and subsequently embraced enthusiastically by the military regime—i.e., "independence", "anti-imperialism", "the 'authentic' African way to development and Scientific Socialism"—excluded the possibility of retaining (or deferring to) the

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<sup>55</sup> The term *barbette* was given to these men—the civil-technocratic soul of an essentially military regime—as they sported goatees, a fashion statement that contrasted their appearance with the orderliness of the clean-shaven military personnel (Petrucci 1993a: 37–40). They did so also to invoke the image of the reformist Young Turks of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (interview with Petrucci).

<sup>56</sup> Among others, Mohamed Aden Sheikh, who served as one of the main designers of the programme of "crash modernisation" and of the national education strategy implemented in the country. Educated in Italy as a secondary student and later a physician, he was first Minister of Health during the first years of the revolution. He later became Minister for Information and National Guidance, and finally Minister of Culture and Higher Education (*Wasaaradda Hiddaha iyo Tacliinta Sare* in Somali). Eventually he was appointed at the head of the Somali National Academy of Arts and Sciences.

power dynamics that had obtained during the colonial era. The revolutionary agenda of the new government assigned great importance to the education sector, at least in principle. Within this framework—and with the advent of the Somali written language in 1972—the education system was nationalized: it had to be entirely Somali. Actually, the effects were at times more rhetorical than real: Italian-speaking personnel (be they Italian or Somali) continued to work and teach in the sector, at least in South–Central Somalia and in Puntland (Cassanelli and Abdikadir 2008: 101). Additionally, the implementation of Somali as the language of instruction was severely challenged by the unavailability of textbooks and reading material (a problem that still affects the education system today, in completely different circumstances). In any case, if this measure seemed to sever the tail of Italian “tutelage”, it was actually bound to grow stronger than before at the head of the system—namely, at the graduate level. During those years, in fact, the SNU was first further developed and then properly set up, strongly promoted by the then-Minister of Culture and Higher Education, Mohamed Aden Sheikh, as well as Siad Barre himself, and the Italian cooperation sector (Cappelli 2011).

## **The Somali National University**

The historical role of Italians in the Somali education sector arguably reached its peak in the founding of the Somali National University, originally in 1969, de facto in 1973. The so-called “avventura universitaria Italiana”<sup>57</sup> - Italian university adventure - was the final outcome of a succession of technical assistance programmes that linked Italy to Somalia from the AFIS mandate onward. Over the period of operation between 1973 and 1991, the university grew to include more than 5,000 students and conferred, from the Italian faculties alone, about 2,120 university degrees (Petrucci 1993b, Cassanelli and Abdikadir 2008, Eno et al. 2015),<sup>58</sup> besides those offered in English.

The SNU was built upon the previous Istituto Superiore in Mogadishu, which from 1962 delivered Italian-language classes in both Economics and Law, provided by the University of Padova.<sup>59</sup> This institute was then transformed into the Somali National University by decree on 14 July 1969, which became law on 1 December of the same year. However, it would be a few years before the

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<sup>57</sup> The label “Italian university adventure” was coined by the project’s protagonists, including Antonio Cappelli, Gianni Mauro, and Giorgio Giacomelli, among others.

<sup>58</sup> There are discrepancies in the number of degrees that the various authors report as officially conferred by the SNU. Eno speaks of 5,000 degrees, Cassanelli 7,500. The reason for the discrepancy is the different computational criteria adopted (including or not including the ‘English’ faculties, years of enrollment and activity, language of instruction, etc.).

<sup>59</sup> Under the leadership of Professor Trabucchi, a Christian-Democrat.

project was fully implemented, under the supervision of Mohamed Aden Sheikh from the Somali side and Ambassador Giacomelli from Italy.<sup>60</sup> For the first time in the history of the two countries' relations, the idea was to set up a fully cooperative educational venture, a proper university on Somali soil, with classes delivered in Italian, in six scientific fields: agronomics, chemistry, geology, engineering (Arts and Crafts in the wording of the 'revolution'), medicine, and veterinary science (Cappelli 2011: 90).<sup>61</sup> Later on a Faculty of Languages was added. The project was fully fleshed out during 1972. As planned, other faculties remained under the direct control of the Somali State (Del Boca 1984: 481) or fell within the development assistance portfolio of other 'universities' or countries. I am referring to Islamic Studies (under direct Somali management), Law, Economics, and the 'Anglophone' faculties. The latter included the Somali Institute for the Development of Administration and Management (SIDAM, meant for administrative managers of the State), the College of Education of Lafoole (for the training of the personnel of the Somali Schools), and the Polytechnic (the Technical and Commercial Teachers Institute or TCTI), all three resorting to English as the main medium of instruction (Eno et al. 2015).

### *The cornerstone: the Scuola Medica*

The Italians were responsible for the lion's share of education within the university. The original pilot project was designed around the Scuola Medica - as the faculty of Medicine was originally called - and was financed initially by the European Investment Fund. An Italian anaesthetist, Giovanni Sampietro, addressing a request that had arrived from the research sector of IMI - the Istituto Mobiliare Italiano - managed to put together a first pool of experts and coordinators to launch the program of university assistance for the Scuola.<sup>62</sup> Among these was Prof Paride Stefanini, a big name in medical science in

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<sup>60</sup> Interviews with Giorgio Giacomelli, Antonio Cappelli, Pietro Petrucci, and Gianni Mauro among others.

<sup>61</sup> For each one of these faculties/departments there was a corresponding university department in Italy that was responsible for the management of the course of study. Agronomics was the responsibility of the University of Florence; chemistry and geology were handled by the University of Padova, while medicine was taught by staff from the University of Rome; veterinary science was the preserve of the University of Pisa, and engineering was managed by the University of Pavia.

<sup>62</sup> Gianni Mauro, the Italian Coordinator of the Faculty of Medicine (1973–1976), and later coordinator of the entire Italian university programme (1982–1986), provides a first hand account of the fortuitous establishment and development of the SNU. In his reconstruction of events, Giovanni Sampietro, Associate Professor of Anaesthesiology and Reanimation at the University of Rome "La Sapienza" took up a request from Giuseppe Angeloni (IMI's research manager) to find a leading figure in the medical field who could realize the project of the Scuola Medica in Mogadishu. Prof. Giovanni Sampietro reached out to Stefanini, a surgeon, who was keen on the whole project from the start and invested himself in the task. Sampietro remained throughout the entire history of the SNU, in his capacity as the representative of Stefanini

Italy at the time. Stefanini was a leading surgeon, with an international reputation. Thus, enthusiasm from both sides, Italian and Somali, saw the main building block of the future SNU laid down.

Later the project was expanded to include the seven scientific faculties mentioned above, and with the involvement of leading personalities of the Italian academic world.<sup>63</sup> The project was meant to help Somalia modernize in those sectors where western scientific knowledge was considered as more advanced. The goal at the same time was to provide the country with an intelligentsia and the human capital necessary for it to leap forward (Eno et al. 2015, Deplano 2014, Cassanelli and Abdikadir 2008).

### *Educational Continuity*

The October Revolution that brought Siad Barre to power intervened in the period between the formal establishment of the SNU (1969) and the setting up of the “Italian” faculties (1973–74), each one as mentioned assisted by a different university in Italy. Undoubtedly, these events saw the ideological and political framework underpinning the *res publica* in Somalia shift, with attendant realignments in the country’s international relations.<sup>64</sup> The First Somali Republic was thus brought to an end, and a new political course begun under the aegis of the so-called Second Revolution. Within this new revolutionary climate, the old practitioners of the education programmes were suddenly, at least rhetorically, inadequate - and thus obsolete. The entire education sector needed to be reshuffled, and in the best intention of the Somali to be *Somalified*. To attain this goal, policy advocated the nationalization of private schools, establishment of new schools, implementation of the written Somali language throughout the system, and textbooks in Somali (Cassanelli and Abdikadir 2008: 99–100).

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and his successors for the entire management of the project until 1990. His main interlocutor in the field, for the eight years of the two MAE missions above indicated, was Gianni Mauro.

<sup>63</sup> Namely, Antonio Sebastiani (medicine), Francesco Lucchini (engineering), Elio Vianello (chemistry), Francesco Cristofori (veterinary), Francesco Sassi (geology), Raffaello Giannini (agriculture), Bianca Maria Tedeschini Lalli (Italian and later the Languages Department).

<sup>64</sup> The evolution of the ‘special relationship’ between the two countries reflected the international alignment of the respective governments as well as shifts in the Italian party-system. In Italy, the parties vied to define relations, challenging one another, alternatively, as events unfolded at home and abroad. The Christian Democrat party dominated Italian politics for the entire period from 1950 to 1969 and thus took the mantle in the relationship with Somalia in this period. When Somalia shifted to the Soviet bloc after the Second Revolution, the Italian Communist party assumed pole position, sometimes pursuing its own foreign policy in Somalia, which almost rivalled that of the Italian State (1969–1978). In the period after the Ogaden war (1977–78), the shift in the system of alliances between the USSR and the USA saw the Communist Party sidelined and the Christian Democrats (1978–1982) and the Italian Socialist Party (1983–1987) dominate. In the final period before the onset of the civil war, the Christian Democrats again took charge (1987–1991).

Yet, if this was achieved—at least in part, at the primary and secondary levels—the degree of dependence on foreign assistance at the university level remained too great for an immediate and painless emancipation. Indeed, in a direct refutation of *Somalisation* and the goal of “self-reliance”, both the Republican and Second Revolution regimes eagerly courted foreign education organizations to cooperate with the local university.

This “cooperation” represented an unprecedented form of ‘technical assistance’. Indeed, the Italian government had very successfully championed “development cooperation” to bolster, as some would put it, (neo)-colonial ties, which were nurtured and maintained essentially up until the end of 1990. For the Somali regime, it was a means to acquire the human resources needed to lead the country through the stages of Scientific Socialism and eventually free it from dependence on foreign technical assistance. Overall, despite shortcomings, mistakes, and aberrations, the programme seems to have had a positive impact on the formation of a large group of Somali cadres, that - quite revolutionarily - were trained and educated for the first time directly on the Somali ground. As pointed out by Petrucci (1993b:194) “nobody will ever be able to take away from the Somali students the university degrees that they had obtained in Somalia”. Even very critical judges of the Italian presence in Somalia, and More generally in the Horn of Africa, like the Italian historian Angelo Del Boca, have a positive opinion of this page in the Somali–Italian relationship. As he puts it, this was “a correct form of cooperation, where not only huge sums were invested, but also creativity, intelligence, and human comprehension” (Del Boca 1984: 482).

For those who were directly involved in the project, Somalis and Italians alike, this adventure remains a vivid, fascinating page in their personal history. The project resonated with the general modernization plan being implemented during the military regime. All those who, in one way or another, orbited around this plan, shared this ideal. They aspired to help the country leap forward, holding scientific knowledge—as understood, practiced, and disseminated from a Western perspective—in high regard. Many still do, being aware of the special status and prestige bestowed on them by the crucial mission they were tasked with. Moreover, many of these people remain friends to this day, beyond clan partitions and contrived rivalries. They look at it as a shared and *unfinished* mission.

More generally, the Italians were for Somalia an important source of teaching and learning—if not tutelage—which arguably indicates the “huge influence of the Italian culture” at the time (Eno et al. 2015: 15). For Somalis of a certain age, I would put forward, formal education was a synonym for

exposure to Italian methods and practices, scientific knowledge, and mentorship. This took the form of the Christian confessional schools of the pre-WWII period, the (almost) national education system set in place during the AFIS, the seamless policy of scholarships during the entire period from 1950 to 1990, and eventually the Somali National University in the period 1973–1991.<sup>65</sup>

## **The Medium and the Message: Knowledge Transfer and Italian Language Acquisition**

The general overview of the development of the ‘Italian’ education system in Somalia allows us to draw a few key conclusions. As mentioned, throughout the long Italian presence in Somalia—especially the period starting with the AFIS (1950) and ending with the outbreak of the civil war in 1991—many Somalis from Puntland and South–Central Somalia (the former Italian Somaliland) received their formal education in institutions sponsored and staffed by Italians. Many thus found themselves immersed in the Italian language, which they mastered independently or learned in the classroom. For many, it was the first language they learned to write, while for others, it was English, or later Somali (the national education system in the period 1974/75 up until 1991 was mostly run in Somali up to secondary school); most also studied Arabic for religious purposes and in confessional schools.<sup>66</sup> Overall, a significant portion of the Somali population spanning various generations—hard numbers are hard to come by—shared this immersive language experience between 1940 and 1990—about half a century, roughly speaking, of Somali national history.

As touched on at the top of the chapter, several of the great scholars in Somali studies of the period found that Italian was already widely diffused when they came to do fieldwork in the 1960s and 1970s (Lewis 2002, Laitin 1977, Luling 1971). David Laitin, for instance, in his seminal study from 1977, sensed the influence of the “English” (read: “Western”) culture in Somalia, to which he accorded an hegemonic role, in terms of values and behavioural choices. In his writings, the profile of the Italian “influence” he depicted was both shallow and something of a caricature of reality. And yet, I argue that what he put forward from an English perspective would hold true also from an Italian one.

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<sup>65</sup> In 2014, 25-odd years after being shuttered, the SNU re-opened. The main issue remains the lack of resources: textbooks, teaching materials, and staff (interview with the head of the Department of Economics).

<sup>66</sup> It is worth noting here that the first president of the Somali Republic after independence Aden Abdullah Osman, kept a diary in Italian up to 1972. Recently discovered (2017) diaries of, (which span the period 1954–2005), were kept in Italian up until 1972, when he adopted the Somali Latin script.

Viewed from the vantage of hindsight, this is even truer if one considers the developments that were still to take place in the period 1977–1991, and for the entire period of the Siad Barre regime, during which Italian influence actually expanded. Within this framework, the implications of Laitin’s theory of “Linguistic Relativity” in terms of *Weltanschauung*, encountering with the Western world, and relevance of the religious values can be far reaching (Laitin 1977: 187).

As mentioned, after 1961 Somalia opted for English as the language of instruction. Things changed again in 1972 when the revolutionary government mandated use of Somali. The entire education system was nationalized—no more private (Italian), or confessional, schools were allowed. Yet, de facto, to phase out Italian from the primary and the secondary schools took quite some time (Eno et al. 2014: 14, Laitin 1977:105–106) and it depended very much on the availability of teachers and textbooks (Cassanelli and Abdikadir 2008). Indeed the complete phasing out of Italian cultural and linguistic influence on Somali society never occurred. If Somali was now the language of instruction in the national schools, the weight of Italian was somehow consolidated with the advent of the SNU.

Students were required to master the Italian language before enrolling in the university. Thus, Italian was embedded (contra national policy) as the language of instruction and partially of administration, at least within those seven faculties/departments that fell under direct Italian administration as per the cooperation agreement. The revolutionary policy of the regime made it possible to remain at ‘home’ while pursuing university studies. This was a way to counteract the bleeding of “national talent” due to brain drain to foreign countries. The idea was to *Somalify* knowledge by steadily training local people to themselves become the next generation of educators, assistant professors, and professors. However, if Somalia wanted to embark on this project, it had to make a compromise and accept a form of ‘cultural’ dependence (Laitin 1977, Hoben 1988) on a western language while the local cohorts were trained up. As mentioned, the introduction of Somali as a written language had occurred only in 1972, leaving scarce time to ‘translate’ any technical and scientific knowledge into the new language.<sup>67</sup>

The SNU set up a preparatory language training programme. Initially, one (later extended to two) language semester—*semestre propedeutico* in Italian—was introduced for students prior to starting university courses. Of course, many would-be students of the SNU had already been exposed to the

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<sup>67</sup> This decision (to accept Italian) could be justified, at least in part, on pragmatic grounds: the absolute lack of textbooks and teaching material in Somali for those disciplines.

Italian education system at local schools, which as mentioned, had been run in large part by Italians in the previous decades. Others, however, had never come across the Italian language because of various language policies and “politics” (Laitin 1977). Others first accessed or completed their course of education up to secondary level directly in Somali, and still needed to acquire a level of understanding that would allow them to follow classes delivered in Italian, either by Somali or Italian staff. This semester thus worked as a first recruitment of the future university population.<sup>68</sup>

The number of students admitted to the *semestre propedeutico* of course exceeded the number admitted to the first year of university, and the number who would go on to successfully complete degrees.<sup>69</sup> Based on analysis by the Italian statistician Germano Grassivaro (1985), about 500 people, on average, attended the preparatory training every year. Over the first 18 years of the SNU’s existence, this would give a total of about 9,000 students. All these students were exposed to the Italian language, and a portion among them directly or indirectly accessed ‘scientific’ knowledge through an Italian vocabulary.

## Teaching will be your Mission

Having access to a formal education system, before and after the establishment of the SNU, made the student population feel somehow ‘special’. It was also a sign of “the new and widespread public appetite amongst the old and young alike, especially in the towns, for Western education” as Lewis puts it (2002: 141), while corroborating Abdi’s hinted opinion (1998: 332) from a few years earlier.<sup>70</sup> Yet, despite the democratization and dissemination policies of the previous years, education remained an elitist affair. Those accessing it, especially at tertiary level, were a minority. It was this minority that found itself exposed to difference, to other cultures, to people with different (read: Western) backgrounds and to a foreign language the sound of which would become more and more familiar with each passing year. It thus worked as an access gate to other worlds—and especially to the Western

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<sup>68</sup> Gianni Mauro and Prof. Antonio Cappelli were responsible for the setting up of this programme, benefitting from the expertise and the technical assistance of the Italian linguist Antonio Amato (Tutino 1975: 28-29), and two of his collaborators in the field: Edoardo and Daniela Lugarini.

<sup>69</sup> Thus, students were sifted at three points. First, not all passed the language test at the end of the *semestre propedeutico*. Each faculty had an entry test and the number of places available was capped, so even those with sufficient language skills did not necessarily receive a place. Finally, students had to successfully pass their exams to have their degrees conferred.

<sup>70</sup> On this same point Abdi (1998: 332): “Immediately after independence in the early 1960s, the positive image of the educated person and what he or she could contribute to the process of nation-building and progress were conspicuous in the Somali culture.”

world, with its cosmopolitan, globally connected capitals (London and Rome), its modernity, and its technological development. It worked as a ‘corrupting’ experience, or perhaps a hybridization, where the Somali identity had to accommodate the cultural and social forms of industrial or post-industrial society, the social texture of which was often at odds with the strong community bonds of the nomadic Somali.

Nevertheless, education was an opportunity—for social mobility, employment, a better life. And many Somalis took pride in the chance to pursue the path of education beyond primary or secondary school and in their ability to navigate that path successfully. Reaching college or university abroad (or directly in Somalia) was a great achievement. Partaking in this opportunity was a way of sharing a form of social and cultural capital. The bearers of such an experience felt they belonged to an exclusive community: the talented, the privileged, the ‘chosen’. A socially distinctive group (Laitin 1977: 8, 123)—the intelligentsia of the country—as a “special class of people” they formed a “diaspora mindset” before they had even departed the country. As Absimil, a returnee belonging to the older generations and now based in Mogadishu, puts it:

Already when we were in school we felt a bit different, almost more Italian than Somali. We spoke more in Italian than in Somali; we went to the cinema, we liked everything about Italy, and they looked at us as if we were outsiders. We were different at that time as we are different today, those who had this opportunity [...] among those who speak and have studied Italian there is a proximity; sometimes we speak in Italian among ourselves so that others [non-Italian-speaking Somalis] cannot understand (6:52).

Yet, in the period the preceded the October Revolution (the military coup of 1969) many representatives of this group were more attracted by foreign opportunities than by national occupations. They often opted for a career abroad, where they would be better paid and recognized.<sup>71</sup> In some cases, they even looked at themselves as an elite liberated from the backwardness that still affected the people “left behind” (i.e. the nomadic Somalis). Some therefore wanted to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the past. As competent and well equipped as they felt, modern foreign destinations had an allure that a possible career at home never could.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> See for instance the so-called “Ballo del Medico”, the widespread practice among physicians of seeking better paid jobs abroad (Grassivaro 1985: 20-22).

<sup>72</sup> A trend that was still to be seen years later, at university level. According to Grassivaro (1985: 20), in average, 11% of the SNU graduated population (up to 1984) had left Somalia.

It was with the nationalistic and unifying impetuosity of the regime of Siad Barre that things changed substantially. The propaganda machine of the ‘revolutionary’ government—and the rhetoric of Scientific Socialism—provided this group with a *mission*, while acknowledging its members’ fundamental role. The political discourse of the new government, which revolved around the new ‘Somalified’ education policy, won the heart and minds of this ‘class’ of people, at least during the first years. They bought into this discourse, which eventually assigned them a project. That project had three interdependent elements: modernization of the country; its liberation from external or Western dependence; and progress for all based on a Somali recipe. In his frequent speeches to the nation, Siad Barre would often refer to this mission and to the importance of this intelligentsia for the entire Somali nation.<sup>73</sup> This project was meant—not without huge contradictions—to *Somalify* as much as possible local education, and make it fit for the needs of the Somali nation. “Education”, the new ruler proclaimed, “is the master key to socio-economic progress by which a better life can be achieved by any given society” (Barre 1973: 241). For sure, the adoption of the Somali script went in this direction, along with all other educational projects/reforms pursued by the military government and discussed above. This included the phasing out of all foreign languages as language of instruction and their replacement with the Somali language from 1972 onwards (at least in principle).

Against this backdrop and the ‘emergency’ situation of the first years of the revolution, every knowledgeable citizen—potentially down to the secondary student—became *ipso facto* a teacher. The famous motto was “if you know, teach; if you don’t, learn”. The new national civil service and the National Literacy and Development Campaigns were basically inspired by this principle. In a speech on the 30 October 1970, Barre (1971: 14) proclaimed: “the teacher, the world over, shapes the will, the mind and the dignity of the people”. He continued, calling on “the teachers to become the leaders of the nation in matters relating to education, discipline and progress of the people” (Barre 1971: 147). Somalia, in other words, needed to produce its own teachers, uncorrupted by or subjugated to any form of imperialism. A true Somali education—which would “liberate [the Somalis] educationally” because “there is no difference between economic, political, or educational enslavement” (Barre 1971: 53)—was expected to make for trustworthy Somali leaders, and “revolutionary cadres”, patriotically

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<sup>73</sup> I am referring more in particular to various speeches made by Barre (1971, 1973, 1977): “Somalisation of our education” (17 March 1975), “Production of useful citizens” (6 July 1975), “Leaders of Tomorrow” (19 June 1975), “On benefits of acquiring education at home” (1 October 1975), “Education should cater for our needs” (8 November 1971), “Serve the People” (29 July 1972), “Never Compromise” (29 July 1972, Halane Speech, 2<sup>nd</sup> part), “The teacher in society” (October 30 1970), “Awarding Degrees at University Graduation” (January 9 1971), “President Siad opens Youth Camp” (June 18, 1971), “Ignorance holds back progress” (July 3, 1971).

committed to their nation and people. For, as Barre (1973: 65) himself declared: “no one can compete with you in what you know about your society and environment, no matter what are his qualifications”.

The ultimate goal was “to liberate the minds of the people” (Barre 1977: 117) to win “the battle against ignorance, disease and hunger” blighting the Somali masses. The teacher was the key player of this crusade against ignorance, “one of the deadly enemies of mankind”. Education the remedy whose “basis should be the production of useful citizens with principles”. And the youth of the Somali nation “should be prepared for their future responsibilities [...] how to contribute to the enlightenment of their people, how to lead their nation from the darkness to the light” (Barre 1977: 251). This *new* intellectual, the teacher, did not consider himself anymore “to be above the masses”, detached and uncorrupted by their backwardness—as the foreign-educated would have it—but was instead committed to the “emancipation of the masses” through education.<sup>74</sup> He or she was, then, like a blacksmith, a craftsman, able to mould the future generations, the Somali youth, “as a red-hot steel in a factory, which can be shaped and moulded in a way it can be best used” (Barre 1977: 262).

To this end, the Scientific Socialism agenda made education entirely free of charge. There were no more fees to pay, in any school, up to university level. Boys and girls could access the education system and pursue their educational path equally. The only limit of this new system was its capacity to penetrate the entire country, and the limited number of student places available at university level. Nevertheless, it was a great achievement that put everybody on the same level and gained a lot of support and popularity among the Somali population.

## **Italian in a Global Field of Cultural and Political Influence**

The influence of Italian culture and language in Puntland and South–Central Somalia was predominant up until 1991, at least among contenders from the western world. Yet, it was far from being the exclusive ‘political and cultural’ force at play in Somalia. During the period under consideration, Italy contended culturally and politically with other sources of power and instruction (Laitin 1977, Bulhan 1980, 2013b, Hoben 1988, Cassanelli and Abdikadir 2008, Morone 2011b). Both culturally and administratively Italian influence contended with the United Kingdom and with English, which represented for many Somalis in the north of the country (i.e. the former British Somaliland) what

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<sup>74</sup> One is reminded here of the *Organic Intellectual* by Antonio Gramsci, a concept with which, most probably, Mohamed Aden Sheikh and (hence) Siad Barre were familiar.

Italy claimed or *de facto* represented for Puntland and South–Central Somalia in the rest of country. As discussed above, English as a medium of instruction was diffused at primary and secondary level first, and then at tertiary level afterwards, primarily with the establishment of the National Teacher Education Centre (NTEC, also known as College of Education of Lafoole) within the SNU (Hoben 1988).

More generally, Somalis were exposed to a strong Arab and Islamic influence (Laitin 1977). From a genealogical, cultural, and religious point of view, the western/European transplants challenged in different degrees Somali indigenous traits, not to mention their Arab/Islamic tradition. Within this framework, during the 1960s, but also later, Egypt for instance proved to be extremely active in Somalia with its policy of scholarships, and in the financing of school establishments and madrasa for the study of the holy Quran (Laitin 1977, Morone 2011b: 87–90). Many Somali intellectuals went to study and learn the ‘science’ of the Quran in Cairo, under the auspices of the main religious schools there, especially Al-Azhar.<sup>75</sup> Later on, during the 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood first (Al-Islah), and then Wahhabism later on (Al-Itihaad), penetrated Somalia culturally, ideologically and religiously, somehow counteracting the secularization trend embraced by the military regime (Abdhullahi 2008, 2010, 2016, Elmi 2010, Hansen et al. 2017). Alternatives to the Sufi Somali tradition travelled in the form of mobile intellectuals, who returned home after their studies in Sudan, the Gulf or the Middle East (Saggiomo 2011, Abdhullahi 2008).

From a more ideological point of view, Italy was also (marginally) exposed to competition from the USSR. The Somali government flirted with the Soviets on more than one occasion between 1960 and 1978.<sup>76</sup> With the rise of Siad Barre to power in 1969 and the Scientific Socialism agenda, Somalia moved ideologically into Socialist countries’ sphere of influence. Although this occurred without compromising the relationship with the Italian government and its foreign policies, a certain ideological rhetoric won the heart and the minds of many Somali intellectuals who looked more favourably to the Soviet bloc given its support for decolonization movements across Africa. Many left on scholarships to Russia (Morone 2011b), which had been on offer since the 1960s (Bulhan 1980). This remained the case up until 1978, when the Ogaden War (1977–78) changed the entire system of

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<sup>75</sup> This is what today is occurring concerning Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries, including Sudan, which is one of the main funder of Islamic scholarships in Somalia today.

<sup>76</sup> Military cooperation with the USSR started in 1963, during the first skirmish against Ethiopia.

alliances.<sup>77</sup> Then Siad Barre instrumentally opted for the assistance of the United States. Indeed, the United States remained across the entire period another source of funding, education, and military collaboration.

Military training and assistance, in fact, were key vectors of foreign engagement by “partner” countries in Somalia. The Italian military and police tradition was predominant in Puntland and South–Central Somalia. Most Somali military personnel were trained in Italy, apart from those who attended the Royal Military Academy of Sandhurst, in the United Kingdom. During the years of the military regime, military collaboration expanded to other countries, albeit without altering the balance of power among the leading ‘influencers’ in Somalia.

## Education Today

### *Primary and Secondary Education*

It is interesting to compare enrolment rates and school populations at the end of the AFIS, with those of the first years of the Revolution, and those of Somalia today. As detailed in the section on “The Italian Presence in the Education Sector”, during the Italian mandate, with an overall population of 2,756,380 Somalis,<sup>78</sup> there were almost 45,000 students enrolled in the education system. To this data one should add the over 50,000 students in confessional Quranic education. Fifteen years later (1973–74), with an overall population of 3,634,000 Somalis, there were 67,406 primary students, 25,688 in the lower secondary schools, and 10,586 in the secondary schools. Evidently, the private ‘confessional’ establishments accounted for a student population of about 16,000 in 1972 (Ministry of Information and National Guidance 1974b: 23).<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> On this occasion, the USSR ultimately sided with Ethiopia, thus determining the inevitable defeat of Somalia in the Ogaden War.

<sup>78</sup> Population Pyramids of the World, 1950-2100, available [here](#), retrieved 29 June 2018.

<sup>79</sup> For a confirmation of this analysis, see Williams & Cummings (2013: 7): “At independence, the country had 200 primary schools and 12 secondary schools, each with its own history and standards, using various languages, different curricula, and teaching methods (UNICEF n.d.). By the early 1970s, an integrated formal school system was established with the assistance of donors with some 1,400 primary schools, perhaps as many as 60 secondary schools (some of which were boarding schools to provide access for children from rural areas), several vocational-technical institutes, a national teacher education center, and a national university. Somali became a written language using the Latin alphabet, and a large-scale literacy programme was undertaken”.

Today the situation is completely different. While the formal education sector has progressed, mainly at the hands of international organizations such as UNICEF (Williams and Cummings 2015), the real bulk of the education today is provided by the Quranic and confessional schools (Eno et al. 2014, Saggiomo 2011, Cassanelli & Abdikadir 2008). In the aftermath of the collapse of the Somali state, *dugsi* schools—usually financed and run by local communities or by Islamic charities and NGOs (Saggiomo 2011)—have again taken the lead in the education system in Somalia. As Cassanelli and Abdikadir (2008) point out:

By virtue of being community owned, the traditional Quranic school (*dugsi*) and its teachers (*macallim*) were highly valued and respected within the society. This is still the case throughout Somalia, where local communities typically build and maintain the *dugsis* and pay the teachers. [...] While there are no official statistics on the number of children who currently attend Quranic schools, they remain by far the major source of early childhood education in the war-torn regions.

In the last ten years, this trend has consolidated. Today (2017), with an overall population of 11,391,962<sup>80</sup>—PESS (2016) gives a figure between 12 and 13 million—Somalia’s education system faces significant head winds. The Joint Strategy Document of the Somalia Federal Republic and UNICEF, “Going to School (G2S Initiative) 2013–2016”, provides an excellent summary of the current situation:

Somalia has one of the weakest and most poorly funded education systems in the world [...] despite significant increases in school enrolment over the last eight years, only 710,860 children out of an estimated 1.7 million primary school-aged children are enrolled in school. The overall Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) for across Somalia, as indicated by school level data collected in 2011, is 42 percent. Whilst the MICS4 indicate an attendance of 51 percent in Somaliland and 43 percent in Puntland.

Along the same lines, a 2013 study on the role in the education sector of UNICEF—the sole actor in the Somali arena engaged with formal education—states:

[T]he predominant cultural inclination was and is towards a traditional Islamic way of life, which represents diverse views toward formal schooling, especially of girls. Most children were

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<sup>80</sup> See footnote no. 77, Ibid.

schooled, if at all, in the Quranic schools run by religious leaders in most communities. [...] The formal education system remains among the least developed in the world. Still, it has moved from a condition of total collapse in 1991 to 2012, when over 700,000 children were enrolled in school (a primary gross enrollment ratio of 22 per cent). The majority of funding is external or community-based.

The fact that “the majority of funding is external or community-based” is clear evidence that the schools these documents refer to are mostly Integrated Quranic Schools (IQS) if not Alternative Basic Education (ABE), in the jargon of UNICEF/UNESCO. Actually, this is in line with data and analysis drawn from Somaliland and Puntland’s *Education Statistics, Yearbook 2013/2014* (MOE 2015).

These studies, released by the Ministry of Education (and Higher Education) of the respective governments (MOE 2015, MOEHE 2015), are based on a template agreed with UNICEF. According to this template, schools are classified as: (1) Formal Education Schools (2) IQS, which use the same curriculum, teachers and textbooks except that additional Quranic subjects are taught; and (3) ABE, which uses its own curriculum and textbooks and may use other non-formal teachers. Although ABE seems to be more an exception than the rule, in terms of Primary Formal Education both studies merge data about Formal Schools and Integrated Quranic Schools—“Formal primary education including IQS” is the formula they use. The reason for this is that the great majority of these schools are actually managed by confessional and community organizations or associations. In both studies, pre-primary education in community confessional schools is acknowledged (but not expanded upon), and data and statistics are completely missing.

In South–Central Somalia—which comprises nowadays the Federal Administrations of Jubbaland, South-West, Hirschabelle, and Galmudug, plus Mogadishu, whose status has not yet been defined—the situation is similar. The dominant form of access to education remains confessional, with the only difference being that the leading provider in the education sector, FPENS (the Formal Private Education Network in Somalia)<sup>81</sup> does not seem to be as ‘integrated’ as the international organizations would have hoped (Saggiomo 2011).<sup>82</sup> FPENS is an umbrella organization formed by Islamic charities that work in the education sector. They account for the lion’s share in education

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<sup>81</sup> For an overview see [FPENS Somalia](#), retrieved 29 June 2018.

<sup>82</sup> Saggiomo (2011: 58) reports on the experience of one FPENS member with the UNESCO–UNICEF curriculum elaboration process: “this process was extremely slow and our participation as Somali intellectuals and experts was limited to the extent that we felt we were considered more as ‘beneficiaries’ than as true partners in a top-down and externally driven process. Gradually we left the UN curriculum development process and initiated our own programme that felt more in line with our own requirements”

matters in South–Central Somalia, and are directly or indirectly financed by Arab countries through international and national Islamic charities. As Saggiomo (2011: 60) notes:

[A]lthough officially the FPENS does not receive funds from the Saudi, Kuwaiti, Egyptian or Sudanese governments, private funds instead find their way indirectly from these countries through the channelling of individual charity donations. The fellowships provided by these organizations also go directly to the students, [thus bypassing] the accounts of the FPENS.

Against this backdrop, a recent study released by the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (Abdullahi 2015) focuses on the main educational challenges facing Somalia (and more specifically Benaadir) in its post-transitional period. Thus, “curriculum chaos”, inconsistent “language policy” (Arab or English, and no Somali at all in formal basic schooling), and “teacher-related challenges” (namely, qualification issues) are the main aspects that the study brings to the fore.

In conclusion, the predominant education approach in Somalia today, at primary and secondary level, is confessional. School establishments are mostly private and community-based or run by Islamic charities. More than seven education umbrellas, along with the role played by international agencies (UNICEF, UNESCO), offer a form of education that is, as a result, quite fragmented: different syllabi, curriculum and media of instruction are in place (Eno et al. 2014: 29). Students often pay school fees (Saggiomo 2011: 57).

### *University Level*

The pattern described above is replicated at university level. In the last few years, private universities have sprung up across Somalia, and remain outside the purview of any of the official education departments or agencies. Based on the Puntland’s *Education Statistics, Yearbook 2013/2014* (MOE 2015), there are currently nine private universities and one half-publicly funded university (Puntland State University)<sup>83</sup> in the autonomous state. In Somaliland, the situation is similar, with another ten institutions. In South–Central Somalia, reliable data and statistics are incomplete. The Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIPS) partially surveyed the higher education sector in 2013. The sample comprised 44 institutions scattered all over the country (HIPS 2013). They were just a portion, although a substantial one, of the total which expanded significantly between 2005 and 2012 when 34 out of the 44 were established (HIPS 2013). At the same time, discussions with local interlocutors

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<sup>83</sup> Interview with Mohamed Said Samantar, Professor of Economics at Puntland State University.

indicate there are more than 45 university institutions in Mogadishu alone. In any case, most of these establishments are beset by quality assurance and accreditation issues (Eno et al. 2015) and rely almost entirely on student fees as the primary source of funding (HIPS 2013, Eno et al. 2015).

### *A 'Cultural' Divide*

It is worth briefly summing up this section of the chapter with some concluding remarks. It is against the historical background and the highlighted trends discussed that scholars have tried in recent years to address the nature and agenda of schooling in Somalia. In their 2004 study Le Sage and Menkhaus insist on the importance of making a distinction between 'reformist' Islamic charities—such as FPENS and SMA (Le Sage and Menkhaus 2004)—and those often labelled as 'fundamentalist' or 'radical' by charities' practitioners themselves, a minority. Elmi (2010: 115–127) more comprehensively stresses out instead the importance, from a post-colonial perspective, of the indigenous forms of education, notably those revolving around the informal sector. In this context, the Somali Islamists, who promote an Islamic oriented form of education and that resort to Arabic language as the main language of instruction, would represent in the current circumstances an importance resource for peace building and for fostering Somali identity. In other words, as he puts it “a resource and vehicle for social transformation”. The advent of Al-Shabaab and their social interventions, including schooling in the areas under their control, has for sure complicated this picture. In more recent years a study of International Crisis Group (2014), which analyses the transformations in the Somali society brought by the consolidation of the territorial and ideological power of the militant group, provided a grimmer scenario. As they put it:

Al-Shabaab will continue to control both money and minds. It has the advantage of at least three decades of Salafi-Wahhabi proselytization (*daawa*) in Somalia; social conservatism is already strongly entrenched—including in Somaliland and among Somali minorities in neighbouring states—giving it deep reservoirs of fiscal and ideological support, even without the intimidation it routinely employs.

Whatever the case, it would be hard and fall beyond the scope of this discussion to determine if and up to what extent these educational establishments promote an Islamic view and agenda that might feed conservatism and fundamentalism, in open opposition with the Western world, while giving way, sometimes, to radicalism, factionalism, and militia violence. Like for many social phenomena I am

sure positions and nuances are several. More importantly here, it is the deep ‘cultural’ divide that separates this new approach to education compared to the one in place during the (Italian) post-colonial period, and during the Siad Barre’s rule, that is to be highlighted. We are talking about two completely different mindsets or outlooks—that is, two distinct *Weltanschauungen*. Moreover, the reason for this cannot be explained by the mere presence in the education curricula of Islamic studies and Arabic language training. Even during the Italian Administration period (AFIS) this was the case (Morone 2011b). In between, the role religion plays in the Somali context has changed and developed. It is not just about pursuing an Islamist vision of social order (Le Sage & Menkhaus 2004: 29), it is about inspiring the entire sphere of life. Le Sage and Menkhaus (2004) present the words of a school master who had already stated in 2004:

In the Islamic Studies classes, we do not just use oral memorization of the verses of the Qu’ran. We also make the students write down on paper what the verses mean to them in practical, day-to-day life. And, we encourage them to speak to their parents about these things.

How distant this idea(l) of education is from the modernization posture of the education system in place until 1991? How far off the relatively more recent Islamist awakening is from the ‘cultural’ tradition that used to look rather in a Western direction? How different is that from the agenda of the Scientific Revolution that tried to combine Islam, Socialism, and Modernism in a new locally driven form of development, which would have been, eventually and “genuinely”(?) Somali? If Laitin’s seminal work’s (1977) implications still hold true, different education systems, from yesterday and from today, have inevitably contributed to shape different world views across various generation of Somalis. In the following section, I tentatively sketch some of the features of the Italoophone Somali diaspora.

## **Concluding Remarks**

This chapter has sought to detail the historical influence of Italians on the development of the education sector in Somalia from the early colonial period onward. In so doing, it has laid out the background for the development of the Italoophone Somali diaspora as it exists today. This concluding section of the chapter will thus lay out some of the core implications of this in advance of Chapter 5, which discusses the arena and actors of the diaspora in much greater detail.

## *Italian Influence in Somali Education and the Emergence of the Italoophone Somali diaspora*

As discussed at length in Chapter 2 on Development Communication or for Social Change, today one of the most salient understandings of Development Communication is as an “institutional project” (Enghel 2015). The Somali case from the 1950s through to the 1970s was a unique laboratory for such a project. Over this period, the development of the country was inspired by a modernization ideal, which focused on the education sector, among others. In education, the Italian ‘cultural’ influence proved prevalent, if not dominant, over the period 1950–1991. Italian influence was thus virtually unbroken from the establishment of the national school system during the AFIS between 1950 and 1960 through to the establishment of the Somali National University in 1973, where the main language of instruction was Italian. Access to this school system and its upper grades was akin to entering the circle of the privileged - that is to say, an opportunity that was highly limited and very selective (Laitin 1977, Hoben 1988, Cassanelli & Abdikadir 2008).

This cultural and educational elite was formed with bonds forged through a distinct set of shared social and educational experiences. This selective limitation - and the social status and recognition attached to it - thus entailed a first form of “social stratification” (Bourdieu 1979). From this came a distinct mentality among those so chosen that engendered among this group of people a sense of mission and purpose above the ordinary population. First, they were often exposed to a formal education system in Somalia run by Italians according to that nation’s educational standards and norms (or directly in Italy). Second, many had access to tertiary education, either in Italy (through scholarships) or in Somalia (at the SNU) in which the language of teaching and learning—the very transfer of knowledge—was Italian. Third, and relatedly, they experienced long-term Italian language immersion in the classroom and lecture hall, leading over time, to the development of near-fluency in—and in some cases mastery of—the language. Finally, they shared in a collective process by which they became conscious of their ascribed role as the *national intelligentsia*, the vanguard of Somali modernization. Indeed, the state in its policy and political rhetoric (Barre 1971, 1973, 1977) emphasized this very point, effectively “anointing” the group with this role and status. Traces of this are to be found in the narratives of many diaspora members today, as I will detail further in the following chapters.

Many representatives of this prospective Italoophone Somali diaspora – whom I happened to interview for the purpose of this research - found themselves in a position to escape the barbarism of the civil war that broke out already in 1989, and more intensively when Siad Barre was deposed in

1991. Others were in the middle of their training or studies abroad when the crisis hit. Actually many others began to leave Somalia already in the second half of the 1980s, anticipating the full degeneration of the situation and subsequent mass evacuation. Ultimately, all those who were positioned culturally and economically to leave the country did so. This was a massive exodus of the intelligentsia of the ‘nation’, an immediate and unprecedented brain drain.

Their familiarity with western norms, values and ideals—and the fact that in many cases they had already left the country (or simply had the requisite skills to travel abroad)—proved crucial in which destination they selected in seeking protection or shelter. In other words, in a process of self-selection those who belonged to this cultural group lent many representatives to the Somali diaspora in general. Today, through an inductive process, I have re-constructed *ex-post* the reality of this socio-cultural sub-group, or elite, within the Somali diaspora and developed a picture of its common characteristics. Given the extraordinary lack of detailed research on the topic, the contribution I advance here in this book are the first attempt at developing this sociological knowledge from empirical data.

As touched upon in Chapter 3 in discussing the research methodology of the book, the concept of diaspora is highly contested and the subject of an ongoing scholarly debate. While discussing my target population, I have adopted and reviewed Safran’s definition—with its focus on *what* diaspora is—applied here of course to the Somali experience, and to that of the Italoophone Somali diaspora more particularly. In light of what I have presented within this chapter, the question also of “when is Diaspora”<sup>84</sup> arises, as stressed by both Adamson (2016) and Sideri (2008). As Sideri puts it (2008: 36), “the examination of the wider social, cultural and economic context that leads to the formation or evocation of diasporas is a crucial part of the quest for a definition”. Trying to avoid essentialist understandings and monolithic identity claims,<sup>85</sup> and assuming that the characteristics of my sample can be somehow generalized, I argue that the following features define the “typical” member of the Italoophone Somali diaspora sub-group:

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<sup>84</sup> As Sideri (2008: 32-35) argues, Safran’s approach foregrounds the existence of some defined territory or “homeland” from which diaspora members were dispersed. Clifford’s definition instead adopts a hybrid, de-territorial approach, understanding diaspora “as a new form of consciousness, collectivity and solidarity in a period [of] fragmentation and deterritorialization”. Cohen takes yet another tack, offering a classification based on the root causes for exodus, including conflict (i.e. “refugee diaspora”). The challenge associated with each approach is the assumed homogeneity of their definitional categories.

<sup>85</sup> The degree with which these features apply to the members of the Somali diaspora varies, of course, across time and space and in terms of gender, age, profession, and so on.

First, they are *educated*, at least in relative terms compared to the majority of their contemporaries. In sharp contrast to them, the members of this educated elite received some kind of formal education. For that reason, their status - actual or perceived - grew and they became distanced, socially and professionally, from the bulk of the population.

Additionally, they are *Italophone*. Given that the old school system in place in Somalia—and later the SNU—were run (mostly) in Italian, most members of this educated elite developed mastery in the spoken language of the (former) colonizer. While some were fluent, others had enough for basic exchanges or trade. In any case, the Italian language became widespread among Somalis—in central Mogadishu more than elsewhere—due to a long history of colonial and post-colonial presence.

Third, they have been inspired by a *modernization ideal*. In other words, this elite was the offspring of a forward-looking *modernising project* that centred on education and on the promotion of a modern form of state. They ended up in the broader Somali diaspora in large numbers as a consequence of the outbreak of the civil war in that country in 1991.

Finally, they are *aware* of being part of an elite or class of people, with a *distinctive background and mission*. There is, in other words, an understanding that reflects a social-cohesion approach—shared interests, values, representations, ethnic or social background (Purohit et al. 2012)—rather than a social identification approach, where “group membership has primarily a perceptual or cognitive basis” (Turner 1982: 16).<sup>86</sup> As already noted, the members of this elite were part of a diaspora even before escaping or leaving the country—a sort of home-grown diaspora. Mutual self-recognition of its members, while distancing them from the masses, contributed to a diffused sentiment of self-awareness and self-esteem. The migratory diasporic experience sealed and crystallized these features.

The Italophone Somali diaspora does not exist as an institutional or functional group, however. Today its members have no distinct public identity or explicit self-depiction. The understanding I am putting forward here is rather of a *cultural milieu*, a shared background within the broader Somali diaspora. This milieu connected (and attracted) diaspora members more in the past than in the present and the future. As a cultural sub-group, its members do not necessarily share today the “awareness of membership” (Turner 1982, Purohit et al. 2012) in a common category: read *Italophone Somali diaspora*. It is this crucial point that I shall take up in further detail in the next chapters.

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<sup>86</sup> Basically the two approaches address two different research questions: the former “who am I attracted to?” and the latter, “who am I?”.

The Italo-phone Somali diaspora comprises today a few generations of Somalis—now approaching 50, 60, and 70 years old of age, if not older—with a distinct and particular outlook, shaped by the direct experience of one or more phases of the modernization project of the pre-civil war period. Moreover, from a religious point of view, their frequent secularism and laicism rarely challenged other more orthodox interpretation of Islam, in line with the tolerant religious tradition of Somalia. Even today, thinking of change ahead the members of this elite have a direction in mind. This direction is more often than not the line traced by the modernization project to which they used to belong, as I will show in the coming chapters.

## Chapter 5

### Context: Arena and Actors

#### The Somali Arena

Somalia can be viewed as an arena in which various actors compete to gain the support of (or control over) the people. This is most probably the case in many countries, but it is striking how reflected this view is in the narratives of the Italian-speaking members of the Somali diaspora. Historically, as we saw in the first chapter, Somalia has been exposed to different sources of cultural influence, sometimes bordering on cultural domination, which Bulhan (2013a) has referred to as “dislocation”. The first of these came with the advent of Islam, which overwhelmed the traditional religious and cultural beliefs. Then came the “classical” colonial period and westernization (of portions) of the country’s elite. Following this was the “proxy colonialism” of the mandate period, which brought also urbanization and modernization processes that dramatically changed the nomadic structure of the society. In more recent years, according to the Italoophone Somali diaspora, it has been the massive influence exercised by the Islamic awakening—first from the Muslim Brotherhood and then from the Wahhabist interpretation of Islam, which arrived via the Gulf countries, notably Saudi Arabia.

There are traces of these intervening ‘influences’ in the discourse about social change among my interlocutors. It seems that since time immemorial, external powers or non-native hegemonic cultural forces have played a role in shaping the mindsets and the mentality of the Somali themselves. It is also a recurring theme in the analyses of Somalis and experts on Somali issues (for example, in the writings of Bulhan, Cappelli, Cassanelli, Elmi, Eno, or Laitin), a reading that sometimes encompasses criticism toward meddling by international organizations and foreign (neighbouring) countries in Somali affairs. It was in open opposition to this ‘uncomfortable (foreign) presence’ that the military government of Siad Barre—at least during the first years and with the best intentions—pursued the policy of ‘Somalisation’ of the Somali culture. The purported idea was that the Somali people, whom the powers-that-be referred to rather disparagingly as “the Masses”—would thus be freed from western or other forms of domination and at the same time redeemed from the apparent ‘cultural defeat’, as many would call it (Fanon 1952, Cappelli 2011), that they had undergone.

It is against this backdrop that I have investigated the ideas of social change as put forward by representatives of the Italoophone Somali diaspora. As already mentioned in the methodological chapter, I have adopted a grounded theory approach in the investigation of the issues at stake today in Somalia, while aligning with some of the main tenets of participatory research. Only my research questions were pre-set, but in such a broad and explorative way that allowed for all sorts of possible replies. My firm intention was first to see what (Italoophone) diaspora Somalis understood by the term ‘social change’—namely, their principal, “top of mind” understanding of the concept. I also wanted their first-hand perception of the situation on the ground, so that the way they apprehend the large issues could surface, as much as possible, and become spoken word. I did not come up with a pre-cooked statement of the problems, which back then I also tended to ignore altogether. I did not solicit possible solutions, exit strategies, or implications for Development Communication (or CfSC), based on my own pre-understanding or initial guess. I asked my interlocutors to share their views of (social) change with me, and then asked whether they had somehow contributed to that idea, project, or goal by taking action in whatever way. This has been my approach throughout the research.

As a result, by looking into their ideas of social change, and their efforts at making sense of the broader Somali world—in Somalia but also in the diaspora—I came to appreciate their understanding of the situation on the ground. Building on this, I have identified what I would consider the main stakeholders or (categories of) actors in the Somali arena. In so doing, I have done my best to express these ideas and concepts as the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora themselves do. By this, I simply mean that I see my role as a researcher as faithfully reproducing, as much as possible, their authentic experiences, outlooks and perceptions as recounted in our discussions.

Thus, my rendering of the Italoophone Somali diaspora’s impressions is as follows. These internal actor groups, or rather social categories, are: 1) the Italoophone Somali diaspora; 2) the new (dominant) Religious Interpreters, including Al-Shabaab; 3) the Ruling Elite; and 4) and “the Masses”. These are the competing forces that move and shake Somali society from within, while often embodying (external) cultural influences, as articulated and imagined by my interlocutors. Of course, this overview is one perspective on the question and by no means should it be considered the last word on the matter. Bearing this in mind, I would argue that in the Somali arena there are three main agents of change—namely, the Italoophone Somali diaspora, the Religious Interpreters, and the Ruling Elite—and a passive recipient, “the Masses”. The latter appear, at least as my interviewees present it, the target of all kind of actions undertaken by all the other actor groups. Let us take a closer look at these actor categories one by one.

## The Italoophone Somali Diaspora Today

### *Self-Representation*

I have highlighted the main features of this generation of people in the previous chapter, when discussing their cultural background and origins. That cultural and political environment has deeply changed in the last 25 years, and can no longer be seen in Somalia today. This change has had a huge impact also on the members of this sub-group. With the outbreak of the civil war, many Italoophone Somalis decided to relocate elsewhere. Many looked to the western world (in some cases Italy) as the likely destination, at least in the beginning. Nevertheless, as “transnational nomads” (Horst 2006), their mobility continued in the years that followed. If a great deal of Somalis passed through Italy at one stage or another, many others decided to settle permanently in other European countries or in North America.

Building upon their original, Italoophone background they have developed new professional, social, and personal identities, while specializing professionally, or acquiring refugee status abroad (often in a Scandinavian country), and having their entire family and network join them. Today these same people, albeit to different degrees, have resumed their engagement with Somalia and maintain relationships with the network of contacts, family members, and friends, they once left behind, as the extensive literature on the subject shows (such as, for example, the work of Hammond, Horst, Lindley, Mezzetti, and Saggiomo).

Yet, there is something about the old imprinting they received that can still be seen today. It can hardly be isolated from what they have become in the meantime, but nevertheless it is worth highlighting this as an important undercurrent of their present identity and outlook. The Italoophone component of this background can assume different forms. It might be a certain outlook or worldview, the still vivid memory of a common educational path or the sentimental yearning for friendship and the relative state of peace that characterizes how they remember and recall their long-gone school days. It can manifest in the cultural and political bonds often linked to the Italian presence and strong engagement in Somalia during the entire period from 1950 to 1990. Sometimes—albeit very seldomly—it manifests in *resentment* toward the Italian colonial and post-colonial conduct in Somalia, and the complicity with the military regime. Unsurprisingly, many Italoophone Somali diaspora members look even today at the post-independence Somalia as the pinnacle of their experience of the Somali State, as an unsurpassed political institution.

The internalization of this experience in one way or another revolves around education and the related Italian language skills. As Sagal, a permanent female diaspora member now residing in the UK comments, “you see, most of us have studied in Italy; we have a degree gained in Italy. Also, my two brothers have studied in Italy” (5:7). Her comments are echoed by Caaisho, a returnee, from a minority clan, who says “we speak in Italian among ourselves; we are the last group to do so” (26:25). This learning and linguistic experience is sometimes associated with the period before the advent of Siad Barre’s rule, as Cumar, a permanent diaspora member, puts it:

We meet in \*\*\*, in London, we see each other, and we feel nostalgic about the good old days when we were in the [Italian] school, when we used to do this and that, or do you remember Professor so and so? [*Professoressa tal de’ tali*, in Italian]. We remember that quiet life, before the arrival of the military (1:1).

In some other cases, it is directly linked instead to the educational policy of the military regime. In any case, growing up within the Italian school system made these generations of Somalis feel as if they belong to a particular group, with a particular outlook. I refer to the words of Absimil (6:52, as presented in Chapter 4), and to those of Ayaan. She is a permanent diaspora women, who proudly affirms her belonging to an “elite”, called to accomplish a certain mission: “the Somalis who studied in Italian and learned Italian had an edge over the rest, also back then, and even before leaving the country” (17:19). Many, indeed, were schooled in the Italian education system, and even today, after so many intervening experiences, at home and in the Diaspora, they recall it as if still extremely relevant in the present.

Italian remains a language of communication, at least in part, among these generations of Somalis.<sup>87</sup> As Maxamed, a returnee, puts it (perhaps exaggerating slightly): “[I]t is a fact that 85% of the representatives of the Somali culture have an Italian [educational] background” (15:50). This statement can be read in combination with the one I received from another Somali interlocutor, now based in Italy (Axado) who says: ‘in the [Somali] diaspora the language of bombast, for expressing distinction and affectation, as well as the scholarly citation, is not English—it is Italian’. The point here is not the attribution of any ranking between competing influences, but the acknowledgment that a certain Italophone perspective is still relevant nowadays.

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<sup>87</sup> A way to establish the level of penetration of the Italian language, not only in the educational realm, but also in general in the everyday life of these urban elites, is to look at the mixed vocabulary in and the Italian permeation of Nureddin Farah’s works during those years. I refer in particular to *A Naked Needle* (1976) and *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979).

For many Italoophone Somali diaspora members, speaking Italian is the mark of a certain cultural and social capital that they share with their group of peers, which they have accumulated through an Italian-influenced educational path. Indeed, for many members of the Somali diaspora—both back in Somalia and in transnational space—speaking Italian today seems to have several meanings. Italian seems to work as the language of memories, of familiarity, of self-distinction, and of trust. Moreover, it is a vehicle to *reminisce*—that is to say, to go back in time to a period when the Somali state seemed more genial, less threatening, or at least alienating—than it is today. It is as if Italian is the password to a common elite past and memory and the (modernizing) project that was attached to it. The language also recalls a *trait d'union* among those able to speak it—namely, a link, a bond, a mark of friendship beyond clan lines, and other “foolish” rivalries, that they decide to suspend, at least for a time. Italian also functions as a vector of self-identification, of self- and mutual-recognition, praise, and pride. It has functions that are more prosaic as well, protecting conversations from being overheard while conveying otherwise politically difficult content and messages openly. It thus serves as a way to escape possible threats to safety and security in the current climate. As a code, it can also serve in political resistance or to simply facilitate escape from the current downturn, while recalling a certain political, cultural, and religious climate that is at odds with the current hegemonic (or apparently hegemonic) new ‘culture’. Finally, it allows access to a certain sphere of trust and space of the self less affected by suspiciousness and other forms of social control, as I will show more in detail in the coming chapters.

*Not just a way to communicate: jokes, spaghetti, and fashion*

To a certain extent, the Italian language seems to have penetrated, permeated, and differentiated the everyday culture, habits, mannerism of these generations of Somalis. My interviewees—perhaps as a way to bond with their interviewer, a native-born Italian, by emphasizing connection and what we have in common—report that the “Italian language” is also a way of cooking, eating (spaghetti, for instance), dressing (nice shirts and shoes made of “vero cuoio” or “real leather”), and dealing with standards of tidiness. The Italian culture has always been perceived as attractive to them: “Italy has its charm”. ‘Italian’ is also *a way of thinking*. This penetration is manifest also in the use of swear words or the acquisition of certain sayings, even jokes, and *barzellette* in Italian.<sup>88</sup> Some of the Italoophone Somalis

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<sup>88</sup> My interviewees were often keen to share their sense of humour in Italian with me. Many such jokes humourously fused Somali and Italian cultural referents in a quite distinct way. Combining the Somali sense of humour with symbols of the

attempt to be still in tune with Italy and the Italian culture, to be able to pick into Italian politics or football, to keep updated by regularly consulting Italian newspapers (such as *La Repubblica*, *Il Corriere*) or television (Rai). Some of the Italoophone Somali diaspora members claim that their being ‘Italian’ has made them more open, more tolerant, and conversant with social and cultural differences than other Somali communities. This is explained by a certain cultural and linguistic proximity with the former colonizer, as Jamilah puts it:

Among the most religious, those who’ve been in Italy are different; you can tell; you manage to communicate, to talk; it is not obtuse; they won’t reject the debate [...] He or she listens to you, understands you [...]. Or in relationship to women, any woman who has been in Italy does not see things as an Arab [...] [Italoophone Somalis thus] have a different mentality—we see that straight away—and have something different. Others are too attached to the religion, and I have noticed that also with the Somalis that I see in Italy, or those who have spent time in Italy. They have a different mentality—they are more open, not like those influenced by the Arabs. Even a woman who likes to go around completely covered, if she has been to Italy [she] is different, she has a different mentality (25:77 and 93).

“We are more open compared to the others”, she concludes, also in religious matters: “we are less attached to religious commandments and prescriptions”. Whether or not this claim is accurate and generalizable, I registered it as in need of further attention and scrutiny, which I undertake in the coming chapters.

### *Conflicting Emotions*

It is also true, however, that the cultural and political bonds with Italy were abruptly cut off (in 1991) and in lay hiatus for more than 25 years. With the outbreak of the civil war, internal political issues rather than a planned re-orientation of Italian foreign policy propelled the Italian disengagement in Somalia. The latter was inevitably jeopardized by the extremely precarious security situation in the field, and the passing of its historical interlocutor (Siad Barre). The scandals and the pervasive corruption of the Italian political system shook the entire political class, marking the advent of the so-

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Italian ‘colonial’ or ‘neo-colonial’ presence in Somalia, they would tell stories that demonstrated great mastery not only of the Italian language, but of the various regional dialects as well. I remember specifically sketches about Aldo Moro’s visit to Somalia, and the story of the “Farmer from Padua”. In addition, I would often receive a vignette or picture here and there via WhatsApp or a story shared by an interviewee that they thought I might find interesting.

called *Seconda Repubblica* in Italy. Many of the protagonists of the relationship with Somalia, from MPs to the big corporate players, were swept away by the ‘*Mani Pulite*’ (clean hands) investigations (1991–93). For good or ill, these generations of Somalis suddenly became orphans—cut off from what had been a long-lasting cultural and political ‘influence’.

As a result, for many Somalis the relationship with Italy became more controversial than ever. Surprisingly enough, it was not the apparent evils of colonialism and neo-colonialism that came in for criticism. Quite the opposite, as evidenced by the apparent continued attraction of the culture, the food, the fashion, and—in most cases—the people. What was at stake, then, was in fact the apparent abandonment of the diaspora by the Italian government, which overlooked and failed to take care of them in the crucial phases of the civil war, and afterwards. This includes today, where new international interlocutors have taken the floor in Somalia. “Somehow everybody feels Italian, but with time the people have been demoralized” as Cabdi, a transitory diaspora member from Brava, puts it (19:5). Indeed, many Italo–Somalis are disappointed by Italy. Once they used to work side by side with the Italians, in Italo–Somali companies or in the development cooperation sector. But in more recent years they have taken their distance, acquired other citizenships, lost any hope or trust whatsoever in “the Italians” and in the possibility that Italy could play ‘again’ the role it once did in Somalia. Their trust has been betrayed, and like jilted lovers they are still somehow in sorrow and pain about this “betrayal”. In the words of Magan, a permanent diaspora member based in London:

I am still angry with Italy, but it is not a link that you can cut like that; there are always these conflicting feelings. I would like Italy to play an active role in the field, to help us out, but they have forgotten us (2:27).

In the aftermath of the civil war, many Somalis have been treated better and offered many more opportunities in countries other than Italy. They frequently point out this aspect in terms of job opportunities, social welfare, and access to international forms of protection. While the civil war was still raging in Somalia, their expectations were never met. And yet, they are living proof of a political, cultural, and sometimes emotional, bond that has never completely broken.

Many are thus subject to conflicting feelings. Bilal, a returnee now based in Mogadishu, says “In Denmark I was given a job [...] and citizenship; that’s why I feel closer to Denmark [...] but if there is a football match between Denmark and Italy, I support Italy” (7:63). Caaisho, another returnee to Mogadishu, feels something similar to his Danish colleague. In her words:

[N]ow that my kids, my family, my father, my brother are all in the United States, I feel closer to the USA. I spent 25 years of my life there and didn't speak a word of Italian during that whole period. I have started to speak Italian again because I have bumped into old friends over here [back in Somalia] (26:47).

Here, again, is an indication that Italian is the language of “lost opportunities”, and of the fabled “good old days”.

### *The Italoophone Somali Diaspora Outlook*

In Chapter 4, I highlighted the main characteristics of this sub-group of people, which I define as the Italoophone Somali diaspora. Recalling the tenets of this blurred and indistinct socio-cultural identity, I would say that its members are typically *educated* and *Italoophone*, they show a *modernization* posture and an elitist self-consciousness. If these are pre-diaspora—in its classic meaning—characteristics, leaving the country before or during the civil war and the experience of another context abroad has added a *diasporic dimension*, or layer, to this identity. Thanks to this diasporic experience, they qualify today as Italoophone Somali diaspora, although—as I have already stated on more than one occasion—this diaspora formation began in Somalia before they had even left. The departure from their homeland, before or after the civil war (a phenomenon that has never ceased) engendered as well their looking back at it with a certain outlook or posture. The experience abroad contributed to expanding this ‘cultural divide’ with those left behind. At least in terms of claimed skills, knowledge, degrees, and understanding of how “the world works” and “what life is”, as my interlocutors like to put it. All this has resulted in the presumption of being in a position to bring about change and make a difference in their home context, as I will address more in detail in Chapter 8 (The Diaspora as a Vector of Social Change). Their diasporic experience may have led them to Italy or, more often than not, to other different contexts and countries. Be that as it may, it is their original outlook and imprinting that still plays an important role even today in their engagement towards Somalia.

### **“The Masses” versus “the People”**

The Italoophone Somali diaspora members conceive of the Somali arena as populated by three main actors that are involved, in one way or another, in the process of social change in the country. These are “the Masses,” the new Religious Groups and Interpreters (including Al-Shabaab), and the Ruling

Elite. In their apprehension of the situation on the ground (back home), “the Masses” are their main target, whereas the new Religious Groups and the Ruling Elite are the Italo-phone Somali diaspora’s main competitors. Social change remains the main framework through which these actor groups are looked at and identified in the first place. My interlocutors approach the entire process and its internal dynamics wearing these lenses

As the members of the Italo-phone Somali diaspora are a sub-group with a strong elitist mindset, the term “the Masses” is a frequent, “top of mind” descriptor they use to describe the people “left behind”. Actually, during my interviews I never used this label, but the way my interlocutors replied to my requests for clarification, about the process of social change going on within the country, ended up, in one way or another, with mentioning “the Masses” as the main target of their endeavours. This applied to developmental activities or merely development communication practices.

I then started to realize that this insistence on labelling the population as “the Masses”—those people affected by “ignorance, diseases, and poverty”, to use an expression particularly in vogue during the 1970s—emerged, most probably, precisely in that phase of Somali history formative to so many members of the Italo-phone Somali diaspora. In other words, I started to discern that the origin of this rubric was to be found in that modernization ideal that inspired the first, post-independence Somali administrations. Even more so, it could be traced back to the rhetoric of the regime during the rule of Siad Barre, and in the agenda of Scientific Socialism.

It was in fact with the advent of the military government—back then assisted by the civilian *barbette*—that the modernization process addressed the Somali people as a whole, at times even reaching out directly to them. This was done, it was claimed, irrespective of clan affiliation and cultural or religious differences. I am tempted to use the expression “the invention of the Masses”, because in the new political apparatus devised by the regime, ordinary folk became in their own rights subjects (and targets) of the new political dispensation. It was a novel development in the institutional history of a relatively new polity that was trying to find its way between “Western” political frameworks—the notions of *nation* and *state* above all—and genuinely local needs and social institutions. As a result, the people—pastoral, nomadic (for the most part) and clan-based *subjects* of a departing colonial–mandate power—became *citizens* of a new, independent modernizing polity that sought (at least rhetorically) a fundamental break with that past and the shackles of clannism.

Several indications of this can be found in Siad Barre's speeches to the nation—for instance, in his frequent verbal reference to “the masses” as the subject and target of national policies.<sup>89</sup> This was part of the rhetoric of Scientific Socialism championed by the regime during those years. This was a combination of ‘Islamic socialism’ and ‘nomadic proletarianism’ administered with a good deal of supposedly authentic *Somaliness*.<sup>90</sup> The Somali proletariat comprised the rural and urban poor, and the nomads. The leading policies of the regime, during those years, addressed them, by means of the mass campaigns. To mention just a few: the self-help campaigns, alphabetization and literacy campaigns, the desertification campaign, and the crash programme (Ministry of Information and National Guidance, 1971, 1973, 1974a, 1974d). The problems of the nation, of the masses, had to be addressed in full, through an absolutely inclusive and comprehensive approach. As such, this approach contributed to shape a mentality and new actors, while notion of “the Masses” entered the verbal and mental landscape of the Somalis.

Today, arguably towards the conclusion of a mission that was never finished, “the Masses” are again the preferred target of diaspora engagement back home, as I will discuss at length in the coming chapters. Here, it is enough to note that in the understanding of the members of the Italoophone Somalis diaspora—but I think the same applies to the Somali diaspora in general—the disadvantaged, the less educated (the “ignorant” at they often put it), and the poor are still at the core of the process of social change as they conceive of it. This is a process that the Italoophone Somali diaspora members I interviewed feel called to lead. “The Masses”, today more than ever, need to be sustained and guided towards emancipation and betterment. That is the elite idea of social change.

It is within this framework that the Italoophone Somali diaspora members’ depiction of “the Masses” can be better appraised. Actually, my interlocutors make an unconscious distinction between “the Masses” and “the People” in general. “The Masses” are always mentioned in relation to educational attainment or cultural capital that, in their view, the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora alone have attained or achieved. “The People”, instead, is a rubric that is used more as an identity marker associated with debates on *Somaliness* (Steiner 2001, Ingiriis 2012, Bulhan 2013a and

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<sup>89</sup> Traces of this are also to be found in the propaganda publications of the Ministry for Information and National Guidance. Among others, see: “Mobilisation des masses populaires” (1974b: 47), “Informing the Masses” (1971: 235).

<sup>90</sup> On the notion of *Somaliness*—understood as the quality of being a dignified Somali (Bulhan 2013a), or as the self-identification and individual ascription to an ideological community (in the ‘emic’ perspective)—see, among others, Steiner (2001). Steiner (2001) discusses *Somaliness* as the “historical resume” (clan, nomadism), “the political product” (colonialism, nationalism), and the “societal ‘code of conduct’ (as recommended by the military regime and the administrative apparatus)”. However, the religious dimension is still missing from her analysis.

2013b). Basically, if “the Masses” lack education, “the People” are affected by distrust, loss of *Somaliness*, and Arabization (including Salafisation). I will tease out these crucial points in greater detail below.

### *A Colossal Dearth of Education*

Members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora perceive “the Masses” left behind as a huge reservoir of potential, unfortunately deprived of any appreciable level of education. The most frequently recurring comment or observation is the state of “ignorance” that pervades the general population. This predicament is in sharp contrast with the cultural capital, background, and aspirations of the people constituting the backbone of the Italoophone Somali diaspora, as I have shown in the previous chapters. Things have changed in Somalia in the last 25–30 years. They have changed so deeply that “the Masses” have taken an orientation that the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora no longer recognize. Their education, if any, has changed, their priorities have changed, and their mentality as well. The two groups are separated by a huge cultural divide that is often perpetuated by reciprocal diffidence and prejudice. There is very little left of the time when things, at least for a moment, seemed to be progressing in the right direction. Back then, prospective members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora believed to be in the driver seat of the modernization project under implementation. In a way that was quite revolutionary, the masses were the intended beneficiaries of such a project.

“The masses, unfortunately, are ignorant” (2:58), “the biggest problem is the ignorance that characterizes us” (10:82), “the majority of people have no education” (13:37), “what ruined us is ignorance” (16:14), “weapons and money have ended up in the hands of people who do not know anything” (22:105), “the 99% of the people of my country is ignorant” (28:10). The list could continue at length. It is quite diffused as an opinion among the members of the Somali diaspora. Now like back then, ignorance is held as one of the main causes responsible for the state of decadence and desperation through which Somalia is going.

This general state of “ignorance” has two main side effects. On the one hand, it is conducive to what I have labelled “mass manipulability”. On the other hand, it engenders “communication issues”. In terms of “mass manipulability”, the implications are several. The Somali “masses” can be easily controlled, manipulated, made believe what is in the interest of a certain stakeholder or actor in the field. This is the opinion that the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora have about “the Masses”:

The economy is in the hands of the religious people—although their practices are hardly Islamic, whatever their claims to the contrary. They take advantage of the weak points of the masses, which they exploit to their benefit (2:57)

The masses are weak; they are exploited (2:59)

For the masses, it suffices to say ‘don’t do this or that’, because the Quran says so and commands it (8:23).

They never believe the person that does something for them, but only the person that gives them something (12:7).

Ignorance accounts for the rest—it is the greatest weakness of my people today [and is] responsible for their falling victim to extremism (14:61).

The clan war is not a war of the people; it has been instigated by warlords, for the pursuit of their political and economic interests (15:10).

In other words, with the complicity of a diffused level of “ignorance”, different actors in the field—be they the political, economic or clan elite, or the armed religious groups—can apparently win the hearts and minds of the people quite easily, recruiting mass support to their cause. I will discuss these aspects in greater detail while addressing the dominant forms of mass control in Somalia (Chapter 6).

Besides “mass manipulability”, this diffused lack of education has many more implications, as I have said. It affects, in turn, the possibility to communicate and ultimately bring about social change, from the perspective of Communication for Social Change. It is conducive, in other words, to a set of communication issues. Education has a great impact on one’s communication faculties. “Ignorance is one of the most strong and rooted things in Somalia. It doesn’t allow you to talk, to listen, and to dialogue” (3:82) says Beydaan, a permanent diaspora member based in Florence. Barre, a transitory diaspora member, upon his return from Jowhar, echoes her views, commenting: “among those boys that have not been to school it is more difficult to get them to understand each other”. “Communication is the biggest problem” states Absimil, a returnee now based in Mogadishu. In other words, the members of the Italo-phone Somali diaspora claim that “ignorance” prevents the people from understanding each other and being able to express their views without running into violent or vehement reactions. It also stops them from simply verbally communicating or just acknowledging

their reciprocal differences. Again, the implications of all this for Communication for Social Change are substantial and I will discuss them deeper and more in details in Chapter 9.

### *The Attributes of “the People”*

In the general understanding of the Italoophone Somali diaspora, “the People” is a more inclusive concept, and has more nationalistic connotations. As a fairly neutral term, my interlocutors would include themselves within the rubric. It thus connotes more or less “the citizens of Somalia”, the nation in general. It is used to clarify or justify some general trait. The term “the Masses”, in contrast, marks a point of distinction—it comes into play whenever the interviewee wishes to distinguish and distance her or himself from the rest of the people. “The People” is thus at play when the interviewee is addressing the true nature of the Somali people, of *Somaliness*, or of what *Somaliness* has become today. It is an identity trigger and reservoir. In sum, if “the Masses” are “ignorant”, “the People” are “afflicted” and have become “greedy”, “no longer trust one another”, and are “under the grip” of the new religious interpreters. “The People” have a range of additional characteristics and features. Moreover, not all of them are negative. Yet the general portrait that the Somali diaspora give of themselves, of their own people, is quite discouraging. Below I summarize the main features allegedly characterizing “the People” of Somali that have emerged from my interviews.

#### **Pervasive Suspicion and Distrust**

“There is problem of mutual trust,” says Taifa, a permanent diaspora member. She adds that: “People don’t believe you anymore when you speak in a frank, honest way that might run against the interests of your clan” (21:17). Along the same lines, Filsan, another permanent member, mentioned the more political implications of this general feeling, saying “the greatest problem for Somalia is the lack of trust, a lack of trust also in relationship to the state. This is extremely important also if we are to solve the problem of Al-Shabaab” (28:15). This comment could help explain their support for the option of federalism, as the words of Amiin make clear: “they do not trust each other, hence [Federalism] becomes the only possible solution” (9:61). Certainly, the years of the civil war have played a role in destroying the social and national bonds that once helped to transcend (albeit never completely) particularistic or clan affiliations (Kaptejns 2013). As Geddi, a returnee from a minority clan puts it “after the years of the anarchy we have completely lost our trust towards other Somalis, although they are not all the same” (27:41). This development also seems to feed into a long-standing feature,

purportedly, of the Somali character. As Cilmi, a permanent diaspora member, puts it “the Somalis are paranoid; they think they always have enemies. The enemies of Islam, for instance, or enemies coveting our resources, such as our oil” (14:107).

Yet the most pervasive and far-reaching effects of this general state of distrust and suspiciousness are to be observed at the interpersonal level, in everyday life, in the exchanges and communication acts between members of the society. This quote, from Magan, a permanent diaspora member, summarizes fairly well the complexity of the issues at stake:

The people have changed for the worst; the art of survival has been stretched to the extreme [...]. You can never trust anybody; you are never sure who you are talking to. If you tell somebody what you actually think you are never sure that he or she actually agrees, be it for reasons of survival, or the situation he or she happens to be in [...]. Anarchy is overwhelming, the art of survival is stretched to the extreme, apathy and indifference are pervasive [...]. The people no longer know what to believe; in one way or another, everybody is just trying to snatch riches (2:20).

This distrust is strictly connected to fear—namely, the fear of being sanctioned, as I will discuss in more depth in the next chapter when elaborating on the forms of mass control at the level of the “inner world”.

### **Loss of *Somaliness***

This general state of distrust has to be interpreted in combination with a general state of disorientation. People seem to be preoccupied with avoiding any form of sanction, while at the same time there is a sense that all they want is to strive for riches, in a greedy manner. *Somaliness*—understood as the quality of being a dignified Somali (Bulhan 2013a), with all the (idealized) attributes and identity claims associated to it—seems to have deserted the Somali arena. The attributes of *Somaliness* are said by the Italoophone Somali (among others) to include the pride and frugality of the nomad, the nobility of the clan member, the patriotism of the citizen, the self-respect and tolerance of the man or woman of tradition, and the code of conduct of the ordinary believer.<sup>91</sup> For my research participants, these qualities seem to have dissipated from Somali society. Magan laments a pervasive greediness that

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<sup>91</sup> I have put together this tentative list based on the accounts of my interviewees. In so doing, I present their point of view. For further details on the notion of *Somaliness* see footnote no. 89 and the debate on the concept (Steiner 2001, Ingiriis 2012, Bulhan 2013a and 2013b).

apparently spares none, and contaminates the religious sphere, as well as the traditional and the political ones. He says:

[B]usiness has become a major preoccupation of the religious groups, and the traditional leaders as well—they have lost their dignity. Once, the elders had no stake in what they were doing; now, instead, there is an inflation in the ranks of traditional leaders. Seemingly, everybody can now throw a cover on his shoulders, take a stick, let his beard grow and call himself an elder. And for this reason they want a house, a car [...] (2:48).

Money and greediness seem to have corrupted the true nature of the Somali, or at least of the majority of the people “left behind”, in the narratives and the reading of the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora. There is a certain amount of richness in the country that “does not come from work” (7:11), as Bilal says. He continues, by explaining that:

There are people here that have become rich because they have accumulated wealth in an illegal way, diverting money from taxes, thorough corruption. There is a huge difference between me and those who live here [...] they have a Toyota 4-wheel-drive, two luxury family houses [*villetta* in Italian] [...] but I can't say all this [as it is too risky and provocative] (7:43).

“Those left behind, they make everything only for money, or for political reasons”, comments Diric, a permanent diaspora member, who left Somalia relatively recently. He continues: “[T]he object of everything in Somalia is money, people think and interpret only based on that” (13:39). This pervasive drive for money has an impact as well on the mutual trust among the people. As Cilmi puts it “it is very rare that there is full trust between two Somalis; there is always some money or interest involved” (14:32). Xabiib, a permanent diaspora member now based in Florence says: “The people who have remained in Somalia are no longer normal”. “Everybody”, he continues, “expects that you do him or her a favour, a courtesy; everybody asks you ‘did you bring the money with you?’ like the Mafia do: ‘Who sent you? Who is behind you?’” (18:13).

Apparently, the level of corruption of the Somali essence and the subsequent spread of diffuse suspicion—because all actions or endeavours seem to be interested, leaving very little space for anything spontaneous—is unprecedented. However, it is a trend that Somalia embraced already back in “the good old days” as some note. Uba, a permanent diaspora member now based in the UK, maintains that, “from the ‘80s onwards the people started to steal a little bit; [that’s when] they started to pursue their own interests” (24:21).

Most of my interviewees claim that all this has resulted in the loss of *Somaliness*, in the loss of the true texture of the Somali spirit (Bulhan 2013a, 2013b). Cilmi is quite radical about it, stating: “By now we have lost our soul, the spirit; the Somali spirit has been killed” (14:33). Many claim that people have changed, and that the Somali identity has been lost. Absimil, who has returned to Mogadishu says

For you it is the same, for sure—every time you go back home, something has changed. But for us *everything* has changed! We are like fish out of water! Here, our culture, our people, our life has changed. It is as if we lived in another country, with different people, and everything has gotten worse (6:47).

The same applies to Uba’s mother who, Uba notes, “after having spent 27 years in Sweden, in Stockholm, absolutely wanted to go back, for the climate, for everything [...] so she returned to Mogadishu, but she has found a changed country. The people have changed; they do not get along very well” (24:7). Jamilah, a transitory diaspora member, shares the same view: “people have changed, I do not recognize them anymore. We are not even Somali any longer. The traditional Arab mentality has replaced ours; there isn’t anything left of us” (25:8).

Within this new context, many members of the diaspora actually feel at odds, and have some difficulty understanding it. For them, it is like the community dimension, mutual respect, a sense of boundaries; sympathy and empathy have vanished from the Somali society. Caaisho, a female returnee to Mogadishu, describes this feeling with very strong words (26:9):

Everybody is crazy, everybody is lying. There is only ‘me, me, me’. There is no ‘we, we, we’.  
Do you know what I mean?

### **Arabization and Salafisation**

Many Italoophone Somalis claim that as a consequence of the civil war, the people “left behind” have developed a substantially different mindset, a different outlook and mentality. My interlocutors maintain that the country has embraced a cultural downturn, which gives prevalence to the Arab components of their otherwise originally more balanced syncretism. Influences from the Arabic peninsula—especially from Saudi Arabia—have intensified over the years and are manifest in the current interpretation of Islam, which they consider more “radical”. The two processes, the *Arabization* of the culture, on the one hand, and the spreading in Somalia of new competing interpretations of

Islam (Marchal and Sheikh 2015, Abdhullahi 2016)—which could be tentatively summarized as *Salafisation*—seem to be the two faces of the same process which further ‘dislocated’ the Somalis from their own original path, tradition, and project. To reiterate, the Somali project referred to here is that of the Somali state under implementation during the AFIS mandate—and more intensively in the decades following—before the outbreak of the civil war.

Jamilah, as I have shown also above, described the situation in these terms upon her return from Mogadishu:

I often talk with the people who are now 25–30 years old, because I am an open person [...]. In the end what they would like, they tell me, is liberty [...]. However, the mentality has taken us backwards; a new mentality has replaced the old one, an Arab mentality, as I like to call it (25:3).

This way of reasoning and of looking at the Somali people today is quite widespread among the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora. Some of the research participants speculate about possible explanations for this state of things. Ayaan states “you see, we suffer from a lack of trust in ourselves; we are insecure in our mentality” (17:190), thus suggesting the need for a source of support and relief. Cilmi goes a step further, analysing this aspect within the framework of a supposed complex of inferiority typical of the Somalis towards the Arabs:

All Africans have assimilated an inferiority complex towards the Arab culture and the religion [of the Arabian Peninsula] as well as towards the white man, by believing that salvation comes from outside [...]. This is the reason why we have stood on the most noble and less compromised lineage of the Arabs; the Arab cultural inheritance is more valued than ours, and it lifts us from this inferiority complex (14:20).

As thoroughly discussed in the literature, in terms of clan lineages, all Somali clan families trace their genealogy from a mythical Arab ancestor (Bulhan 2013a, Lewis 2002 and 1998, Laitin 1977). In the last two or three decades, this idea has gained in relevance against the backdrop of those processes of *Arabization* and *Salafisation* I mentioned above. Cilmi attempts as well to trace a parallelism between the ideals of Scientific Socialism from the 1970s and the social ideals of the new religious interpreters. His reading of Somali society is quite interesting because it reveals many elements of continuity:

Even these [new religious interpreters] engage with social–communist ideals in Soviet style, with exaggerations sometimes on the need to follow the example of the old USSR or China,

whereby they resume the subjugation of the consciences of the people, in the same way Siad Barre managed to dominate over the rural areas (14:15a).

I will resume the discussion and expand on these aspects in Chapter 6, where I will focus on the forms of social or mass control, clannism and the superiority/inferiority complex, and on Islam and Islams.

### **Mutually Helpful and Generous**

The people “left behind” are not just greedy, suffering from a huge loss of *Somaliness*, under the grip of a new religious course, and atomized by high degrees of suspiciousness. In the accounts of the Italoophone Somali diaspora members, the Somali people are still, despite everything, very generous. In this coexistence of generalizations, they are also good-hearted, and keen on helping friends or family members out. It is quite striking how the characteristics recalled in the previous paragraphs are juxtaposed with these positive qualities—often just a few sentences apart—in the space of a single interview. Inevitably, talking about the general opinion of one group of people over another is conducive to prejudice and other forms of social labelling which have the great limit of sounding almost absolute and exclusive. For this reason, they often give rise to misinterpretations and the tacit assumption that what has just been said holds true in all individual cases.

On many occasions, I have found that members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora seem to agree on one point: the generosity of the Somali people and their willingness to share and to help other people in need, even beyond clan family affiliations. “The Somali family—meaning here the Somali clan family—is actually an open family,” says Maxamed (15:9), a returnee and medical doctor. He continues, noting “it looks like they hate each other, between different families, but in reality they help each other, they give each other a hand”. He offers an example “my patients [...] come from all over Somalia. Those without relatives in \*\*\*\*\* or in Puntland are hosted anyway by other families, other clans; they accommodate these visitors in their homes! Actually the tribal problem is only instigated by a few individuals” (15:58). This view is shared by Ayaan who says “your neighbour, if she sees that you have nothing to eat, gives you something to eat; we are generous in this sense, people mutually help each other” (17:124). Uba expresses more or less the same view, noting

The Somalis are generous, and altruistic; they help each other; they are not like the people here in Europe, where the billionaire does nothing to help his poor brother. They [Somalis] look after their parents; for sure they do not leave them in the street, or in a hospice (24:32).

It is worth briefly summing up this section of the chapter with some concluding remarks. Potentially, the *generosity* of the Somali people is also an open gate towards mutual understanding and reconciliation. What my interviewees have hinted at, through their comments, is actually a viable option out of the Somali impasse; out of this general climate of hate and distrust that I have described so far. One may even venture to say that ordinary people, although affected by many issues, maintain a certain degree of authentic generosity. Those social bonds that seemed irremediably compromised by distrust and decadence of *Somaliness* can still be appreciated within the Somali society. They might constitute the first building block of a renewed social contract, which many consider all but shattered in contemporary Somalia (Leonard & Samantar 2013). Yet, the dominant palette in the picture I received from my interlocutors reveals a disrupted social texture, in which even clan affiliations have been surpassed for the worse by intervening religious and economic power dynamics. As a result, my interviewees often feel disoriented and incapable of breaching the barrier of isolation and fear behind which all of them appears to be imprisoned, albeit to varying degrees.

As hinted at already, there are powers and actors at play in the Somali context that work in fact towards conflicting goals. These actors—among them the Somali “Masses” (if not the “People”)—are often depicted just as victims and tend to mobilize groups and sub-groups within the Somali society to their particularistic benefit, as many Italoophone Somali have pointed out. They actually often mobilize the people against each other, along clan lines, along religious affiliations that compete socially and morally, or along economic groups of interests, based on dynamics of power access and control. These actors—who basically compete with the (Italian) Somali diaspora for control of the “Masses”—are the Ruling Elites on the one hand, and the new Religious Interpreters (including Al-Shabaab), on the other. In the next section, I briefly touch upon the nature and characteristics of these two actors within the Somali arena. As always, I am adopting the particular standpoint of the Italoophone Somali diaspora.

## **The Ruling Elite**

Members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora often mention unspecified and fuzzy ideas, such as “strong powers” or “strong interests”, to refer to those actually ‘in charge’ today in Somalia. They use these expressions when talking about the people who really count, who can mobilize other people and the masses more generally, and who can decide for the many, pursuing their own interests and agenda

at the interstices of the still limping Somali state. Such broad labels help my interviewees make sense of what is going on in Somalia today, hinting at those who are actually to blame for a situation that remains arduous and is likely to stay that way for the foreseeable future. “Strong powers” thus works as a prejudicial rubric, meant to include all those known and unknown actors, agents of power, corruption, and violence that still dominate in Somalia. It is a way to refer to what I would call the “non-citable”, rather than the “unspeakable” (Kapteijns 2013: 21–70).

There is a key concept that is usually mentioned by all members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora when describing the characteristics of that group of people who actually have their grip on the present and the future of the country. For however undefined and blurred the notion might sound, this key concept is *self-interest*: be it economic, political, or religious interest. Interest of the self, first, of course, then any other qualifier afterwards. As my research participants claim, self-interest embodies the primary law in force in Somalia today, it explains the conduct of the people, and provide the reason why for (mis)deeds and actions. This concept links to that idea of greediness and loss of *Somaliness* that I discussed when talking about the people. It comes back here when describing the new dominant ethos in Somalia, where the interest of the group (the good of the many) has succumbed to the interest of the single party or the individual (Bulhan 2009, 2013a).

### *Self-Interest, Corruption, and Oligarchs*

Self-interest is the new ethos and agenda that drives the elites, those who used to operate more for the public or collective benefit, who the Italoophone Somali claim are now just focused on their own advantage. Implicitly, the members of the diaspora compare the present state of affairs with the period just before the outbreak of the civil war. Under the weight of time and the widespread pessimism about how things are working (or not working) in Somalia today, the memories of the past are softened and sweetened (Ramsden and Ridge 2013, Trunji 2015: xxi). Within this framework, many interviewees claim that in the period from independence to the mid-1970s –some stretch it until the mid-1980s– the Somali ethos and principles were somehow still valid. There were ‘rules’ that sheltered and inspired the conduct and the behaviour of the people. Afterwards this was no longer the case.

I list here a selection of comments that I have received from my interlocutors, where self-interest appears as the inspiring concept and the explanatory variable for all the wrongdoings of those in power in Somalia today:

Eighty per cent of the politicians in Somalia today think only of their own interest, of their own individual benefit (5:18).

The clan is getting weaker; they are all preoccupied by other interests, and they help each other among themselves. They are good at doing business among themselves, beyond clan partitions (6:32).

Today it is not anymore a mere clash among clans; it is a bit better now in this respect. Instead, it is a huge confrontation among different interests (10:28).

There are the particular interests of those who gain from the current state of affairs in Somalia, of those who overpower the people, those who take care of their own interests, the individual self-interest typical of the western tradition, as I call it (10:86).

The last 25 years has seen the same people being elected repeatedly, and these people only pursue their own interests (12:9).

We live in a period where the supremacy of the political and religious opportunism, [and] of the warmongers, is the order of the day (20:3).

The greatest problem about Somalia today is that everything revolves around money and weapons, which are in the hands of mafia people without any scruples (22:103).

Every Somali diaspora member has left his property, his rent, in the hands of those who were left behind, but these people do not want peace, because it is from war and from the conflict that they can establish businesses, run their companies, build houses, etc (23:23).

A new, modern, self-centred, and money-driven ethos has purportedly replaced the old Somali ethos, sometimes even prevailing over clan politics, if advantageous (Bulhan 2009, 2013a, Marchal and Sheikh 2015: 163). Italoophone Somalis are quite aligned on this. But who are these people, or better said, who are these ruling elites? If self-interest is their common trait, what kind of class, or group are we talking about? At the scholarly level, recent accounts of this state of things have addressed the political class, widespread patrimonialism and patronage (Ingiriis 2015), the Salafi business people and their hegemony in the marketplace (Marchal and Sheikh 2015), the “malfeasant elite” in general (Bulhan 2009, 2013a). Based on the accounts and the narratives of the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora, the ruling elite can include: politicians; members of the government and of the institutional establishment; business people; clan chiefs and elders; and pious religious representatives

and supporters of Al-Shabaab. They represent a crosscutting mix of actors and agents, who respond more or less to the same power and money logic. They constitute an economic or just a power elite, with leverage over the public resources or those of other people (of any class) in the pursuit of their private goals and benefit.

*Corruption* is another key term. The ruling elites are not just selfishly preoccupied by their own needs and self-interests, they are corrupt as well. “There are people here who have become rich because they have amassed money in an illegal way, diverting taxes, thanks to corruption” states Bilal (7:43) a returnee to Mogadishu. Corruption thus pervades the political class, hand in hand with the strong economic and corporate interests. Corruption is transversal and pervasive, across clan families and from top to bottom. In such a system ruled by money power, even the political system is dramatically affected, because the political class is apparently selected based merely on plutocratic criteria. As Daahir, a permanent diaspora member based in Italy, puts it “in the last 20 years it suffices to pay a little bit of money in order to rule, or to become a member of parliament [...] and even if you run into a motion of distrust it suffices to bribe someone, or some clan chiefs, and everything results in *the fact does not exist...*” (12:24). Ayaan shares the same view, describing in this way the process leading to the appointment of candidates in the parliament and in the government: “people are chosen based on the availability of money; whoever can offer more is elected” (17:30). As another returnee puts it, “it is a system in which money rules”.<sup>92</sup>

*Self-interest, corruption, and oligarchy* are the key words that Italoophone Somalis use to describe this state of affairs in Somalia today. What is public belongs to individuals as long as they can (forcibly) access and manage it, my interviewees assert. The boundaries between public and private property rights have been completely blended. The predatory and looting experience of the civil war period seems to continue in the aftermath of the civil war and with the “flawed state”, to borrow an expression of Bulhan (2013a). Bilal, who returned to Mogadishu some years ago, says: “[T]here are people who sell pieces of land that used to be public and therefore that do not belong to them—such as land on which there was a school before the war—and they go to the market, and sell it for \$40,000!” (7:14). There are apparently no limits to this vicious logic, which seems to corrupt everything and everybody, while it corrodes the very essence of the state.

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<sup>92</sup> This state of affairs actually seems quite in line with the patrimonialism typical of the Siad Barre period, in particular the last years of his rule. The Italian journalist Pietro Petrucci has been a fierce critic of this period and of the level of corruption associated with the Italo-Somali business sector.

Al-Shabaab, many Italoophone Somalis claim, is part of this story of general corruption. The supposed collusion with the strong powers is an argument that is often hinted at. Jamilah, a transitory diaspora member, is of this opinion “Al-Shabaab would finish immediately if politics wasn’t corrupted”, (25:60) adding: “[T]he government knows everything, but they [its members] have to pursue their own interests” (25:70). Cabdi—who is also a member of parliament—puts it in these terms: “religious extremism and Al-Shabaab are just excuses, behind them there are economic empires” (19:8). He adds: “the problem of Islam and of radical Islam, in reality, is secondary—it is only a tool to maintain political and economic power in the hands of those who have it” (19:11). I will expand on this in the section on the new religious groups and interpreters.

### *A Degraded Elite Mentality*

This is the general situation, with respect to the new elites, within which the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora are supposed to take action, if they are to bring about change. The ruling elites interpose themselves between the diasporans and their target—i.e. “the Masses”. Their mentality, be it appreciated from a political, economic, or religious point of view, is anyhow corrupt. This is the conclusion to which most of my interviewees arrive. The traditional Somali dignity and pride that was attached to the old generations seem to have vanished from Somali society (Bulhan 2013a). Respect for the old rules of the Somali game, for the old indigenous and “pastoral ethos”<sup>93</sup>—when the clan system was more homogenous with the ecological, political, and institutional environment that surrounded it—has given way to the principle of self-interest.

The corruption of the traditional Somali ethos has pervasive effects (Bulhan 2013a). As already mentioned, when discussing the general loss of *Somaliness*, Magan, a permanent diaspora member, maintains how “business has become a major preoccupation of the religious groups, and the traditional leaders as well—they have lost their dignity” (2:48). Daahir, a permanent diaspora member, confirms this point of view, noting: “[T]he situation in the last 25 years has degenerated. Those who represented the religious, political and social leadership have completely changed; the head [of the country] has completely changed” (12:3). Maxamed, a returnee to Puntland, uses these words “the traditional leaders are not who they used to be once, yesterday—they sell themselves to the first one who comes along; nobody can deny this” (15:47).

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<sup>93</sup> Bulhan (2013a: 236-240, 2009) gives an account of the “Pastoral Ethos” that contradicts the mythical and idealised version I received from my interlocutors.

Even clannism has changed today, as I have already mentioned on more than one occasion. If clannism was once the social contract associated with a certain system of production and sustenance, today it is rather a way for Somali oligarchs to play into people's sentiments and affiliations to advance their own particularistic advantage (Bulhan 2009). A recurring comment among my interviewees attributes the evils of clannism to the elite, rather than to the people. Maxamed says (15:10): "there is this huge discrepancy, between what the warlords and the clan chief preach and what the people live. This clan war is not their war, it is not the war of the people; it is instigated by the warlords for the pursuit of their own economic and political interests". This analysis is shared by Taban, a permanent diaspora member and medical doctor who resides in Italy. He says

[T]here are those four or five people that continue to trouble the situation, who do not want friendship between [the clan groups] Hawiye and Darod [...]; although those two clans have fought against each other for only three months, in reality that war continues even now, over here [in the diaspora]. Those four or five people live from this fight (23:36).

It is with the bitterness of this comment that I conclude this section and move to discuss the main features of the new religious interpreters.

## **The New Religious Groups and Interpreters**

Italophone Somali diaspora members are often engaged with their homeland. I have already pointed out that the type, quality, and intensity of these forms of engagement vary according to location, personal and professional profile, level of education, goals, and relocation plans. Showing a certain level of commitment to bring about change in Somalia, from far abroad in the diaspora - either as business people or traders going back and forth to the home land, or as parliamentarians based in Mogadishu but with a double-passport - can result in completely different views, practices, and objectives. Consequently, this is manifest in the personal outlook, in the strategy adopted, in the preferred interlocutors and targeted audiences (on similar issues, see also Hammond 2015). Yet, a thorough analysis of my interlocutors' accounts shows very important similarities among them in the way they read and decipher Somalia today. As mentioned on several occasions in the course of this chapter, they tend to see the same main stakeholders, which they consider the most relevant game players within the Somali context. After having dealt with "the masses" and the ruling elite, I now move to look deeper into the new religious groups and interpreters.

For most of my interviewees, the new religious groups and interpreters represent by far their greatest competitors in the Somali arena. Religious affiliations and school interpreters, which nowadays dominate, at least apparently, the spiritual and the social realms in Somalia, are actually the main rivals of the Italoophone Somali diaspora. They constitute the biggest spoilers of the Italoophone Somali diaspora members' 'demiurgic' plans about Somalia and the Somali people. The picture I am giving of the context is a re-elaboration of the depiction I received by the Italoophone Somalis diaspora (particularly the same of it that I interviewed). As for other stakeholders, I am relying on my interviewees' perspectives in order to make sense of this arena in which they also play and 'compete'. Of course, while scrutinizing their views I present an analysis that does not claim to be neither objective nor definitive.

### *Groups and Affiliations*

The point is that there is not a moderate and a fundamentalist Islam, but there is a Wahhabist interpretation, which has been taking over for decades, a real political program.

*Cilmi* (14:121)

It goes well beyond the scope of this research to provide for a detail discussion of the religious groups and affiliations now prevalent in Somalia. On this, readers can usefully consult a range of sources.<sup>94</sup> Most of my interviewees consider themselves orthodox Sunni Muslims, and, in line with the Somali tradition, as adherents of the Shafi'i rite or school of Islamic law. They usually refer to all other religious groups and affiliations now dominant, apparently dominant, or just present in the Somali landscape using a general "they". This broad rubric can include, although not necessarily, one or a combination of the following: members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafists or Wahhabists, Al-Shabaab militants, Takfir, and other 'radicals' of all sorts.

In the remainder of this section, I explore the main interpreters of the often-lamented new religious turn on the ground, while adopting, as usual, an Italoophone Somalis' perspective and wording.

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<sup>94</sup> On the traditional Somali interpretation of Islam and on Sufism, see Bulhan (2013a, 2013b), Lewis (2002, 1998); on Al-Shabaab, see Crisis Group (2017a, 2017b, 2014), Hansen (2013), Mwangi (2012), Marchal and Sheikh (2015), Marchal (2011); on Islamism, in general, and Islamic charities in Somalia, see Harper (2012), Saggiomo (2011), Østebø (2010), Le Sage and Menkhaus (2004); on the Islamic awakening in Somalia see Elmi (2010), and more in particular, on the Muslim Brotherhood in Somalia see Hansen et al. (2017), Abdhullahi (2016, 2008); on Salafism and/or Wahhabism in Somalia, see Marchal and Sheikh (2015).

As already stated at length, the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora are the epigones of a completely different socio-cultural and political climate, which is, little by little, being ineluctably eroded by time and developments on the ground. Their perception of a group or affiliation as “radical” is to be understood and appreciated in relative terms. It is relative to personal political preferences, inner beliefs, and understanding about radicalism and religious orthodoxy. Below is a tentative list of the main ‘interpretations’ from such a perspective.

Sufism is a “mystically mediated view” of the believer’s relation to the Prophet and to God, which proves “particularly well-adapted to Somali social organization since it enables Somalis [...] to sacralise their society at all levels of segmentation by indiscriminately canonizing their lineage ancestors as ‘saints’ [...]”. I borrow this definition from Lewis (1998: xii), who observed as well that “Sufism is long established and well developed” in Somalia (1998: 8). If many Somalis are, or used to be, at least nominal members of a Sufi Order,<sup>95</sup> only the most devout gather together in residential communities or congregations (*jamaat* in Somali), which are often organized around stable settlements of cultivation, and the shrine of their founders (Lewis 1998: 18). Representing one of the most widespread interpretations of Islam in Somalia, at least until a few years ago, Sufism permits veneration of the saints, along with a number of ‘pagan’ practices that result from a sort of syncretism between Somali Cushitic pre-Islamic worship, the clan structure, and the intervening Islamic ‘colonization’ (Lewis 1998, Mansur 1980). In the words of Cilmi:

Sufism is another way of being Muslim, it is the old guard who thought the Quran in the rural areas, without attributing too much importance to the ‘attire’ [...] the various Sufis are reunited in the Congregation, where they clashed for supremacy, such as the Mad Mullah did for his Saalihiya (14:96).

Ordinary Sunni Muslim is an appellation that, quite strikingly, has no definition in the ‘texts’ produced by my interlocutors. This is however quite revealing of the system of knowledge through which my interviewees make sense of the religious phenomena in Somalia today. Most of them claim to belong to this nebulous group, while having inherited the Sufi heritage at the same time. Although religious tendencies and affinities with one affiliation rather than another are quite difficult to guess and investigate, most, if not all, my interviewees seem to agree on one point: their idea of Islam is not compulsory. This works as a cutting line, a criterion that pulls all my interviewees together. Based on

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<sup>95</sup> The three most prominent *tariiqas* (orders) among the Somalis are the Qaadiiriya, the Ahamdiya, and the Saalihiya (Lewis 1998: 11).

this understanding, Islam does not entail the possibility to claim from God the right to do anything on his behalf, nor to oblige anybody to follow certain prescriptions or rules. Additionally, for most of my interviewees, the separation between state and religion, the secular and the sacred, between politics and religious matters is of paramount importance in defining their way of being Muslim. It works as a threshold, a way to discern the radicals from “the ordinary Muslim”, as they claim to be. This distinction needs to be born in mind, as it used to be the case, also in practice, at the time of traditional Islam and Sufism (Lewis 2002: 15). Within this framework, Al-Sunna Waljama'a is considered the moderate paramilitary arm of the ordinary Sufi Muslims opposed to the radical Islamist, such as Al-Shabaab. In the words of Aaden, a returnee to Puntland: “[of Al-Sunna Waljama'a] there is a traditional component, to which the majority of Somalis belong, and a more recent one, which has embraced armed struggle” (22:60).

The Muslim Brotherhood—also referred to as Al-Islah or Ikhwan—is widespread in Somalia, as it is in a great portion of the Muslim world (Abdhullahi 2008, Abdhullahi 2016). The Brothers represent an interpretation of the Quran and Shari'ah law that is considered and perceived to be less radical than that of Salafism or Wahhabism, but still more strict than that of the ordinary Sunni (Sufi) Muslim. In Somalia, they are referred to as Al-Islah and often are associated with the cultural and political influence of countries such as Qatar and Turkey (Marchal and Sheikh 2015). In the words of Cilmi, “they [the Brothers] started to penetrate the society thanks to their social assistance activities, and they have therefore gained the support of the people” (14:60). He adds that the mentality of the Muslim Brotherhood is:

[I]o go among the people, make friends, in order to spread the word. Al-Islah, in fact, means the ‘one who gives advice’, who fixes [... and] they believe in the importance of working in the social sphere, from the schools to health care, to help all those who are not in a position to embrace the right path, to give a chance to everybody. They never impose conditions [for this help] in the beginning (14:83, 14:92).

With them “you can always talk, let’s say” he finally remarks, as confirmed by recent research (Marchal and Sheikh 2015: 136).

Wahhabism or Salafism (including Al-Itihaad and Al-Itisaam) is an Islamic doctrine and religious movement originating in Saudi Arabia that claims a desire to restore “pure monotheistic worship” in the Islamic world. Its adherents, who prefer the term Salafism to Wahhabism (which is perceived as derogatory), are appraised as the new dominant radical interpreters of Islam in Somalia, at least in the

rural areas (Marchal and Sheikh 2015).<sup>96</sup> Their influence is growing, according to a trend that was to be seen already in 1998 (Lewis 1998: 43–45). Although Al-Islah members are also technically Salafis, Italoophone Somalis usually employ the term “Wahhabism” only with reference to this prevalent understanding of Salafism in Somalia, while including the experiences of Al-Itihaad and Al-Itisaam (for more details, see Marchal and Sheikh 2015).<sup>97</sup> It is also a way to keep it distinguished from the more moderate Muslim Brotherhood. Those Somalis who had been studying in these areas purportedly brought Wahhabism back to Somalia from Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries (e.g. the UAE). This is the recurring narrative among my interlocutors. In addition, this is often pointed out to mean that Wahhabism does not belong to the ‘traditional’ Somali culture. “Wahhabism condemns idolatry, conflicting with the cult of the saints, for instance, which is of Sufi origin” says Cilmi (14:95). He continues:

Now [it is the turn of] a strong Islam, which denies everything and enslaves you, now everybody thinks by the rule ‘the Prophet said this and this’. This is the dominant mentality today, starting from the small context, at the family level, with all those recommendations: ‘all this will help you progress, and have success’, because ‘God and the Prophet wills it’. Whether you hold a PhD or are illiterate, the mentality is always the same—there are no differences (14:15b).

Many Italoophone Somali diaspora members point out that ignorance is the great ingredient for falling into this kind of religious interpretation and for adhering to Wahhabism, “the full order of God”. As we have seen, “the masses” are depicted as lacking education and being manipulable for that reason. Here this trope surfaces again in the words of Cilmi: “ignorance makes the rest; it is the great weakness of my people today” (14:61).

Takfir is a “term [that] means declaring a fellow Muslim an apostate” (Marchal and Sheikh 2015: 144). The takfir movement’s members still have a “Wahhabi background, although the term links to

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<sup>96</sup> Reportedly, Al-Islah, the Muslim Brotherhood in Somalia, is still dominant in the urban contexts and in the education sector (Marchal and Sheikh 2015).

<sup>97</sup> Al-Itihaad, within Somali Salafism, has become a Salafi Jadid movement “that renounced the necessity of (armed) jihād”, differently from Al-Itisaam. For more details, see Marchal and Sheikh (2015: 158). Within this context, the term Al-Itihaad is used by my interlocutors in two different senses. Sometimes they use it to refer to the paramilitary organization (Lewis 1998: 44), of Wahhabist inspiration, which took the lead in Somalia at the time of the Islamic Courts (2006) and was then crushed by the Ethiopian military intervention. Alternatively, it refers, to Salafism in general, perceived as the current and purportedly dominant interpretation of Islam in Somalia. Borrowing my interviewee’s words, Al-Itihaad members “are Salafis, and the extreme fringes verge on Al-Shabaab” (14:90).

an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood born during the 1960s in Egypt and crushed by Nasser's security forces" as Cilmi puts it. Today in Somalia, they represent the 'moral' and 'integral' interpreters of the Quran, those who reject all mixing with the 'infidels' and the 'impious' Muslims, the Muslims that do not live by the 'right' rules (Firro 2013). In the words of Cilmi "they are the self-proclaimed morally right, and they fight injustice by condemning all those who do not agree with them". They consider all other Muslims as not true believers, and as such, "[they] cannot eat food with them, buy meat from their butcheries, or even simply converse with them" and yet, among them, "you always find those who want to teach you the beauty of their mentality and tell you that you are wrong" (14:117).

Al-Shabaab is best conceived not merely as a concrete entity but also as an abstract "covering term" used by Italoophone Somalis to denote "them"—the wider, amorphous group of unspecified radicals, extremists, and armed Islamists in Somalia today. An offshoot of the Islamic Courts, Al-Itihaad, and a militarized version of militant Wahhabism, they are often responsible for terrorist attacks while professing affiliation to Al-Qaeda and promoting Salafi–Jihadist ideology (Crisis Group 2014, Hansen 2013, Mwangi 2012, Marchal and Sheikh 2015, Marchal 2011). They have the highest media profile in the international arena and are the most feared domestically. At the same time, they enjoy a certain level of popularity and support, purportedly, in some portions of the national territory, along main roads, junctions, crossroads, and rural areas more in particular, which they claim to be controlling. They represent a hidden minority, many Italoophone Somalis maintain, but they turn out to be as effective and as strong as a majority. Yet, precisely how much support Al-Shabaab has among the 'common' people remains very unclear, for two sets of reasons. First, because in this intricate jungle of competing interpretations of Islam, it is very hard to make clear-cut distinctions based on well-defined assumptions of who is pro or against what. Secondly, because belonging or just sympathizing with one or another group, in real or only professed intentions, shifts continuously across the religious spectrum. It depends on various circumstances, such as security concerns, level of fear, time of the day, and so on. In other words, not only do concepts and interpretations often overlap, they also coexist and shift at the individual level.

For an updated analysis of Al-Shabaab's strategy, affiliations, and the like, readers can usefully consult the studies mentioned in footnote 46. Here, for the purposes of this overview, I focus more on the general perception among my interviews. Al-Shabaab, whenever it is mentioned, it is often associated with feelings of great hatred, dislike, and hate. It is often labelled with all the bad qualities of the Somali society today. As Aaden, a returnee to Puntland puts it "the hatred the Somalis feel

today towards Al-Shabaab is strong; [since] someone who does not know Islam very well [thinks they can] kill you [...]; all this engenders a great hatred all over Somalia” (22:54). Hodan, a transitory diaspora member residing in Italy, echoes his view, stating: “All Somalis hate them; there are those who admit it and those who do not, but all Somalis hate them; they are killers, cutthroats, and they even go after children” (11:43). There are nuances, though. Among the more religiously oriented, this level of condemnation although persisting, is often mixed up with the attribution of some responsibilities to others (internal or international actors alike) or to their reproachable behaviours (decadence of the costumes, and similar). However, I will discuss this in greater detail in the following section.

## **What is Radical?**

The Italoophone Somalis tend, either explicitly or implicitly, to make a distinction among the ‘religiously’ connoted stakeholders active in the Somali arena. They tend to contrast the “ordinary” with the “radical” interpreters, and to oppose their like-minded people to the rest. By doing so, they also explicitly or implicitly express an evaluation of who is right and who is wrong in interpreting the ‘message’. Within this context, I have registered the tendency to mention Al-Shabaab as the wider, amorphous group of unspecified radicals mentioned above. This “covering term” comprises all possible “radicals”, all excessive interpretations of Islam with which the Italoophone Somalis feel at odds. For sure Al-Shabaab and all those groups willing to use violence, including armed force—“(armed) jihād” (Marchal and Sheikh 2015)—are perceived as the most threatening. Nevertheless, short of using extreme violence to achieve their goals, virtually all the radical groups resort to other damaging (if less brutal) tactics against ordinary Somalis, including psychological intimidation and subtle or veiled threats. Al-Shabaab is neither the sole issue nor the most relevant one my interlocutors seem to be confronted with.

In the eyes of the Italoophone Somalis diaspora, the differences among the various ‘radical’ groups seem to be a way less relevant than expected for the purpose of taking sides and making sense of the situation back home. I have registered, in general, a (claimed) crosscutting non-acceptance of violence and of ‘radicalism’, for how fuzzy and shifting these concepts might be. Actually, it would be extremely difficult to try to associate my interviewees to one group or the other among those listed above. Militancy, proximity or just symphatisation with one of the possible interpretation of Islam can only be guessed, also because the discomfort—if not outright *fear*—in dealing with the subject, in revealing

one's own affiliation or preferences, openly taking sides, or by just mentioning one group rather than another is pervasive to say the least.<sup>98</sup> Overtly expressing one's own preferences might be quite inconvenient under the current circumstances in Somalia. Avoiding this is also a protection strategy meant to keep criticism and retaliation at bay.

Yet, as said above, I have registered among my interlocutors a certain liberal approach and inspiration in dealing with religious issues. The prevalent (basic) reading I can make of their religious stances is of tolerant and open for discussion form of Islam, at least they claim so. They seem eager to champion the idea that religious belief is an entirely private concern that should be left up to each individual decide for him or herself freely. Sometimes they even argue that the issue of religious tolerance should be debated openly and democratically. Two main patterns can be identified. First, they claim to be “ordinary” interpreters of Islam. Second, they group together—sometimes it is denoted as a continuum—“radical” interpreters and armed religious groups, and more in particular Wahhabism and Al-Shabaab. They tend in fact, quite often, to assort them into a single overarching concept and understanding of religion that they do not agree with. Let us look in more details each one of these categories.

“Ordinary Muslim”. Based on recurring statements, the category “ordinary Muslim” is used to refer to those who make a clear distinction between the secular and the sacred, and live by this principle. It is an important demarcation, which seems to apply to many members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora falling within my sample. Cumar, a permanent diaspora member, comments in this way: “I consider myself Muslim, full stop; like everybody, I oppose religion as a political instrument” (1:46). Magan, also a permanent diaspora member, echoes this view:

As far as I know, the major religious groups [in Somalia nowadays] are Salafis or Wahhabists. I actually don't know for sure, because every now and then there is a new one, a new extreme interpretation. I only know that the Quran does not tell me to go and cut the hand or the head of any poor guy who has stolen a banana (2:60).

Aaden, a returnee to Puntland, is very careful to avoid offending anybody and making the point of the separation between the political and the religious spheres. He says: “[I]f you are a devoted Muslim, directly in dialogue with God, there are no religious arguments likely to engender conflicts, for

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<sup>98</sup> In line with this, see for instance International Crisis Group (2014: 12, fn 65): “Al-Shabaab's ubiquity in daily life has led to it being termed ‘Arsenal’, a means of referring to it or its actions without its name for fear of eavesdroppers”.

everything takes place in your conscience and in your private relationship with God” (22:79). He adds: “Thanks to the Wahhabists and other negative elements from Saudi Arabia, where they went to study, the entire situation has turned upside down, and the religious group who used to be respected the most, the Sunni, is now threatened” (22:48).

Continuum is another important idea that emerges as a pattern among my interviewees. Here, the focus is on the fact that the borders between certain radical interpretations and other armed or terrorist groups is very blurred, and that there are elements of continuity among the two. From the Arab world, it is often claimed, and more in particular from Saudi Arabia, preachers and missionaries have spread a radical interpretation of Islam. The Muslim Brotherhood, and the Takfir among them, would have partially contributed to this process, although moving from a different context. As a result, Salafism, an interpretation of Islam that is at odds with the background and the culture from which the Italoophone Somalis have originated, is now dominant in Somalia. In the words of Cilmi: “there has been a huge indoctrination, these people [Salafis] have ultimately alimented Al-Shabaab and Takfir, their Sunnism is based on a Hanbalite version of Wahhabism—if they do not slit your throat they send you to the Creator with bullets” (14:148). Along similar lines, Aaden comments “Al-Itihaad is a creation of Wahhabism, of which Al-Shabaab is another more recent version” (22:48). He adds, “it is always the same elements that have changed their shirts” (22:59). In the words of Cilmi: “Salafism is the common trait, although it is split into centres and schools that have different names” (14:90). Quite revelatory is the comment of Hani, a returnee to Mogadishu, who says: “me and all those who share my views have seen who Al-Shabaab—and all their sub-groups—are. They are all those who call themselves ‘Al- Al- Al’ [meaning all sorts of Islamic groups and affiliations]”.

## **The Al-Shabaab: “Those Strangers, Those Interlopers”**

Among the various religious groups and interpreters, undoubtedly the Al-Shabaab are the most feared. They actually control a portion of the Somali territory, mainly in South–Central Somalia, most intensely in Jubbaland, the South-Western Administration, Hirshabelle, and Galmudug (Crisis Group 2014, 2017b).<sup>99</sup> In the words of a transitory diaspora member, Amiin: “from below Galmudug up to

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<sup>99</sup> Administratively Somaliland comprises the regions of Awal, Woqooyi Galbeed, Toghdheer and the contested regions (with Puntland) of Sanaag and Sool; Puntland Federal State comprises Bari, Nugaal, the claimed North Mudug territory, along with the contested regions (with Somaliland) of Sool and Sanaag. South–Central Somalia comprises the following Federal States and regions: Galmudug (Galgaduud and Mudug), Hirshabelle (Hiraan and Middle Shabelle) South-Western

the borders with Kenya, there are Al-Shabaab, and the organized crime [groups]” (9:16). The situation is different in Somaliland, and in Puntland. Here the level of penetration of the Al-Shabaab has been contained: “[T]hey are at the level of Galgalo, a bit above Bosaso, but in general they do not cause an immediate threat in Puntland”, comments Gurey (8:34), a permanent diaspora member.

However, apart from Al-Shabaab’s territorial power, which has been decreasing over the last few years (Marchal and Sheikh 2015, Crisis Group 2014, Hansen 2013, Mwangi 2012, Marchal 2011), the group has managed to penetrate Somali society and economy in a way that is much more frightening for the Italoophone Somali diaspora. The level of control and domination in these realms seems pervasive and ubiquitous to them.

### *The Multiple Readings of Al-Shabaab*

My interviewees offer various readings of the Al-Shabaab phenomenon. They are not just a group of self-proclaimed, religiously-devoted people making terrorist attacks and requiring the rest of the Somali people to be observant of a certain interpretation of the Shari’ah. My interviewees are quite straightforward about it. Al-Shabaab, in the perception of the Italoophone Somali diaspora, is also—indeed, above all—a *leading economic actor* in the Somali arena, engaged in a wide range of criminal profit-making ventures. Moreover, the idea that Al-Shabaab is a kind of front for a set of non-religious activities and economic interests (organized crime, essentially) is quite widespread among my interviewees. Daahir states: “[T]he problem is that in Mogadishu North there are people who can earn up to \$300,000 a month, but how can it be? Doing what? It is clear that these people can afford \$5,000 to hire someone to kill somebody” (12:63). Ayaan, says “In Mogadishu there is like a *mafia*, a *camorra*, that of the hospitality sector, they fight each other, compete against each other, and recruit execution squads to hit their enemies” (17:38). Being an economic actor means having certain economic interests and of course a certain political agenda. “They”—used in the amorphous, blurred sense I described above—control the market, or at least, portions of it, and interfering with this set-up can prove risky. In the words of Guuleed:

There must be a reason to kill you. If you find a cheaper supply of, say, computers and start to trade in this sector then, yes, they might kill you, since you have entered their market. Unless

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Administration (Bakool, Bay and Lower Shabelle), Jubbaland (Gedo, Middle Juba, and Lower Juba) and Benadir (Mogadishu). See also Crisis Group (2017b: Appendix A—Map of Somalia), and Crisis Group (2014: Appendix A—Map of Areas of Control in Somalia).

you have protection [from someone else] then it is clear you are going to have to pay them [extortion money] (10:61).

Alternatively, the Al-Shabaab can just drive you out of the market “legitimately”. As Guuleed explains:

[I]f you are trading some import from the western world, and bring it to market, they are so strong that they can [temporarily] undercut prices so drastically that you can’t compete and you go bust; they can do that, they size of the sales they handle allows them this leverage (10:122).

A corollary of this is that the Al-Shabaab is prepared to instrumentalize religion to justify any number of “impious” activities. Maxamed, a returnee to Puntland, explains this in the following way: “Religion is just a pretence [for them]; actually, their activities are not religious at all; they even ignore it [religious principles] when it suits them. They instrumentalize their pious façade to cover all sorts of atrocious behaviour” (15:36). This is an interpretation that is echoed by a transitory diaspora member in the heart of Mogadishu, Cabdi, from Benaadir, who says: “[R]eligious extremism is just an excuse, behind it there are huge economic powers” (19:8). “Al-Shabaab are traders; they do not want peace, because it is from this state of affairs [violent competition] that they draw great advantage” (24:7) states Uba, a permanent diaspora member. The bottom line here, according to many Italoophone Somalis, is that Al-Shabaab endures because it is a *highly profitable network*.

A complementary argument is that there is extensive collusion between Al-Shabaab and the government or the ruling elite, apparently under any political order, as discussed earlier in this chapter. This is often hinted as a fact, as something that would help make sense of an otherwise inconceivable state of affairs, which should have been solved once and for all years ago. This reasoning is quite widespread among my interviewees, irrespective of their background and expertise or their actual distance from the circumstances they are purporting to interpret; the analysis so proffered is more often the product of prejudice and hasty deduction than true insight. Geddi for instance, a returnee from Benaadir, touches upon “[t]he Somali government and its links with Al-Shabaab” (27:125), while Jamilah, a transitory diaspora member, remarks: “I also have some doubts about the relationship between the government and the Al-Shabaab” (25:67). Indeed, the penetration of Al-Shabaab elements into the state apparatus has been discussed in other studies on the subject (Crisis Group 2014: 12, Hansen 2013: 141).

Nevertheless, I noted that interviewees are equally sensitive to nuance in relation to the various ways Al-Shabaab conducts itself, or has done in the past. For example, some mentioned examples of “rightful” (or at least helpful) conduct by members of the movement. Guuleed comments on this as follows: “[Y]ou see, there are two types of Al-Shabaab [member], they are not all the same; what they did during the Islamic Court period was not that bad [...]; they fought against the degenerate elements in the Somali society” (10:22). A similar stance is evinced by Geddi, a returnee to Benaadir. He comments on the recent Lido attack, when Al-Shabaab militants exploded a car bomb at the gate of a seafood restaurant overlooking the Mogadishu Lido Beach, on 21 January 2016.<sup>100</sup> His testimony is revealing of a certain view among some Somalis:

The owners of these places [e.g. the Lido restaurant], which are built very close to the sea, are linked, directly or indirectly, to the warlords of some years ago. These people occupied state-owned land by force or bought it illegally and built these monsters [exclusive tourist venues] [...]. Little girls from very poor families, veiled of course, come to prostitute themselves in these places, while their very brothers, without their [the girls] knowledge, are often militants or fans of Al-Shabaab. The owners of these places are criminals because they let these baby-prostitutes in and are perfectly aware that Islamic terrorists target these kind of places, where corrupt politicians and police come looking for sex (27:90).

There is, in other words, some level of credence granted to certain Al-Shabaab conduct. Sometimes Al-Shabaab is seen as an antidote against the deterioration of the Somali public morality. This is a sentiment that is somehow implicitly linked to that loss of *Somaliness* I discussed in the sections on “the Masses” and the Ruling Elite. At other times, my interviewees empathize with Al-Shabaab’s outright rejection of any form of international meddling in the Somali affairs, which has been endemic. This is, in fact, a reason of concern that often winds through the Somali society and among the Italoophone Somali diaspora as a mark of the overall discredit attached to all forms of political or military intervention in Somalia.<sup>101</sup> In particular, with regard to the international military presence, Guuleed says:

The military personnel from AMISOM [the African Union’s regional peacekeeping mission in Somalia] earn around €1,500 a month [a huge sum in local purchasing-power terms]. And what

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<sup>100</sup> On this, see Al Jazeera’s account, available [here](#) and The Guardian’s account, available [here](#), both retrieved 3 July 2018.

<sup>101</sup> “Who lives in Europe or in USA can bring about change in Somalia, but sometimes even here [in the Diaspora] there are people who support Al-Shabaab”, as Hodan, a transitory diaspora member, puts it (11:55).

do they do with all this spare cash? They act with impunity, ravaging and raping, and soliciting the poor girls from the bidonville surrounding the airport near Halané [...]. Can't security be taken care of by Somali forces, instead? No, because the local military are totally unreliable. So, when the Al-Shabaab say 'we don't want these foreign military deployments here', they are showing more nerve than the Somali government is (10:42).

Guuleed reaffirms the need to distinguish between the two kind of Al-Shabaab on another occasion, saying: “[T]he true ones are just misguided people trying to do something good for the country [while] the other kind are malevolent and mercenary, happy to bump off whoever gets in their way and are using the Al-Shabaab cover as a way to get away with it” (10:62).

At the same time, on various accounts, Al-Shabaab provide certain opportunities that would otherwise not exist. This is why they are so appealing to the youth. After returning from a business trip to Mogadishu, Jamilah, a transitory diaspora member, made the following report about what she had been told by another individual who may have been an Al-Shabaab's supporter, if not a member: “They [Jamilah's interlocutor] talked to the police, asking for the possibility to study, to go to school, because they're poor, and yet they wanted to learn to write and read. But they pointed them in the direction of Al-Shabaab” (25:61). True or not, this statement exemplifies a situation that Jamilah summarizes in this way: “[T]he point is that you may reach out for help, but the only people heeding these requests for assistance are the Al-Shabaab”. She adds:

There are young boys on the streets of Mogadishu aged four to seven years; they live on the street and make ends meet from the street. With nothing but polish and brush in hand, they will approach passers by offering to clean their shoes. This is all these kids can do. Obviously, it is Al-Shabaab that is “taking care” of these boys, because this government is there but pays absolutely no heed (25:62).

“Being young is the same everywhere”, claims Beydaan, a permanent diaspora member based in Italy. She adds:

[Y]oungsters have the same desires, be they in Italy, Somalia, or elsewhere: they want the latest fashions (shoes and clothes), to dress like those better of than them, and a mobile phone. They fall victim to the Al-Shabaab because they promise them a mobile phone and \$100 in their pockets (3:3).

Family issues, a lack of guidance (3:81, 3:85), and intergenerational conflicts revolving around the role of tradition (17:63) are often put forward to partially explain these types of behaviours. Whatever the case may be, it suffices here to recall these aspects to give an idea of the environment, the arena, within which the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora today act, while trying to make sense of and interpret it.

As discussed above, the Italoophone Somali diaspora look at and try to explain Al-Shabaab in different ways. If condemnation and rejection are quite general (and widespread) at the individual level, distinctions and extenuating circumstances are occasionally put forward. Sometimes the level of simplification and generalization behind these attempts at making sense of the phenomenon reflects uncertainty and a lack of direct knowledge on the matter. Along these lines, another very common place about Al-Shabaab is that they are supported and remotely controlled from outside Somalia. This, of course, is a way of directing blame for the problems in the country (exclusively) on foreign actors. My interviewees, on various accounts, hint at the fact that the Somali militant Jihadi group is supported by “the Arabs”. “Who is funding them? The Arabs, who have more or less the same ideology”, states Guuleed (10:1017). On other occasions, the “Gulf States”, including Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are mentioned instead. Some other times it is Ethiopia instead that is to blame: “[I]t is commonly known in Mogadishu that behind Al-Shabaab there is Ethiopia” (27:93). This triggers a revival of old quarrels between Somalia and its main bordering country, the eternal ‘Christian’ enemy, the occupier of Somali ground and people (Ogaden). Finally, at times, Al-Shabaab are regarded as comparable to Al-Qaeda itself: “[O]nce you are a member of Al-Shabaab you are controlled from outside, from Al-Qaeda, which goes beyond the clan” (22:85). These types of narratives are very frequent among the Somalis. They are nurtured, historically, by the frequent meddling in the Somali affairs by the international community and neighbouring countries alike.

### *Invisible Presences*

What is important to highlight here is not the validity of these claims per se, but rather the climate of distrust and suspiciousness they have contributed to engender among the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora and others. The blended and multiple perceptions they have of “the radicals” and their armed fringes, as opposed to the “ordinary Muslims”, impose a constant state of alert and attention. The multiple readings they give of the phenomenon of Al-Shabaab—with implications that spare none in the Somali arena, including the ruling elite—feeds a general state of angst and suspicion.

Their idea of Al-Shabaab—understood as a covering term for the wider, amorphous group of “unspecified radicals”—implies constantly shifting boundaries between the visible and the less visible, the surfaced and the submerged.

Al-Shabaab has become a synonym for ubiquitous surveillance and hidden danger. I have often registered among the Italoophone Somalis their feelings of being constantly under the scrutiny and the monitoring of someone who in the given context could belong “to the other side”, as if some “big brother” were constantly watching them. Whenever members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora directly interact within this context, even abroad or from abroad, they have to come to terms with its hazardous nature. They do so by adopting a very low profile, which is manifest in their (un)spoken language, as I will show in the remainder of this study. Al-Shabaab and other non-ordinary religious interpreters can be here and there, up and down, and all around you, without you knowing it: “[T]hey hide within the people”, comments Filsan (28:17), a permanent Italoophone Somali based in Italy. Al-Shabaab “could be your son, and you don’t know about it, you don’t know him” says Hodan (11:66). “It is possible that some of those fighting the government have actually some agents in the public administration and you would never know”, states Bilal (7:33), a returnee to Mogadishu. “Al-Shabaab’s strategy of hit and run make them even more difficult to identify and control [...]; the main point is that it would be much easier if there was a border, but they are within the community”, Gurey comments bitterly (8:39). These are recurrent remarks among the Italoophone Somalis.

A state of fear, distrust, and suspicion has thus pervaded Somali society, at home and in the diaspora. Jamilah, a transitory diaspora member, upon her return from Mogadishu, says: “[Y]ou just don’t know where Al-Shabaab are, where they hide themselves. Even your friend could end up being Al-Shabaab—how are you possibly expected to know who they actually are? How do you know to whom are you talking?” (25:67). She reports of having talked to a business partner whom until the very day before she found out she would never have suspected of being a member of Al-Shabaab. He then went on the run, because the government was after him. She says: “[F]rom what he was saying, from what he was wearing—he went around in a pair of jeans—I didn’t recognize him at all. But I seriously ran a risk, because I told him [my opinion] about the need for change in the country” (25:69).

The Italoophone Somalis—and most probably members of the Somali diaspora in general, as well as “the Masses”, the people “left behind”—live in this permanent state of distress and puzzlement. Their understanding of the context, of the boundaries between “the radicals” and the less radical, of Al-Shabaab’s membership and militancy, and of their potential collusion with the ruling elite, is

strongly compromised by a diffused level of suspicion. In some cases, this suspicion bleeds over into full-blown conspiracy theories, as one interviewee observed when he stated: “Someone told me that they [Al-Shabaab] have an entire arsenal hidden away underneath the city [of Mogadishu] but I don’t want to believe it.” (10:107).

### *Visible Responsibilities*

Despite Al-Shabaab’s purported “invisible presence”, it is worth noting that at the same time my interlocutors point to their appearance as a mark of their identity. To my interviewees, Al-Shabaab, and more in general “they”—“the radicals”—are easily recognized by their distinctive dress. Whenever my research participants talk about the shortcomings of the anti-Al-Shabaab war they come up with this kind of reading. Similarly, they do so when expressing their incredulity about the fact that they are still undefeated. In other words, they read Al-Shabaab and “the radicals” in such a way that whenever they look at them it is as a centre of power, rather than as people. This is often the case when they attribute the responsibility of the present situation to those in charge. While blaming them, the members of the Italo-phone Somali diaspora do not spare the ruling government and elite from any criticism at all. “If you look at their behaviour, you can realize who they are” states Hodan “but if I can see them, how can it be that the government does not see them?” (11:59–60). She insists on this point. She is a transitory diaspora member, and while commenting on the recruiting strategy of Al-Shabaab, she reports her own experience of some months earlier. She was approached by someone who offered help so she could educate her niece. Straightaway she realized this man belonged to “Al-Shabaab”—again here as a cover for the wider, amorphous group of unspecified radicals. In her words, “It is clear he was an Al-Shabaab. Nobody will ever come to tell you ‘I’m Al-Shabaab’, but it is like that! But if I can notice and spot it, why can none from the government?” Again, the borders between the generic “they”—“the radicals”—and the armed fringes prove quite fuzzy in the perception of the Italo-phone Somalis, while education seems to constitute the new religious interpreters’ primary form of action and engagement within the society. Similarly, Daahir, a permanent diaspora member who has recently visited his hometown twice, says:

[W]e know who is and who is not Al-Shabaab; who has this kind of ideology. It is easy to recognize them, to spot them from their manner, their behaviour, what they say. In fact, only those [among them] who are killers seek to hide who they are; the rest are pretty open (12:64).

### *Propaganda, Indoctrination, and Silencing*

Propaganda and indoctrination, the Italoophone Somalis claim, are actually the new religious interpreters' and Al-Shabaab's main weapons.<sup>102</sup> Through these tools, they make their presence appear stronger than it really is. Cabdi, a transitory diaspora member from Benadir, says: "Do you know how many fundamentalists there are in Somalia? Maybe 1%, but it's the propaganda that makes them grow, or appear as if they are dominant" (19:12). Whether or not the details here are accurate, this statement is consistent with that climate of fear and suspicion I have already mentioned. Through terrorist attacks or other forms of radicalism, "they" spread fear. Through propaganda, "they" make fear grow, and through indoctrination and training, "they" make sure new adherents join the group as supporters. This is how the Italoophone Somalis see the situation in Somalia today.

My interviewees often resort to the word "indoctrination" to refer to the transfer and uncritical acceptance of beliefs and principles through a top-down process of instruction, whereby new recruits are brought into the cause of the new religious interpreters. The term is often put forward as synonym for brainwashing, of controlling the conscience of the people, whereby their own judgement is suspended. In the words of Hodan:

My brother wanted to send his son to the college, to make him study. So, I went to get informed about where we could send him. I talked to somebody, who told me: 'look, we only have a couple of rules here'. The first one is that for four months the boy cannot see nor talk to anybody; the second is that the boy must be between 6 and 12 years old; the third is the fee, \$130, which is very low. It's clear that in this initial period they brainwash him. And it's clear that this man was an Al-Shabaab, but nobody will ever come and tell you as such (11:38).

A similar stance is shared by Cilmi, who says:

The so-called Islamic fundamentalists: the taleban, shabaab, Muslim Brothers, daesh, and all those affiliated. They are always successful, because their work of indoctrination starts from the bottom, and they do not disdain anybody among the subjugated, who for better or worse provide them with a feeling of dignity and superiority towards all those intellectual slaves of the western world (14:50).

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<sup>102</sup> This is in line with what Mwangi (2012) but also Crisis Group (2014) and Hansen (2013) have pointed out.

In addition, he notes: “[I]n their confessional schools people learn only the Quran, in Arabic, a language that the Somalis usually do not speak fluently, a bit like learning the Bible in Latin, without knowing what the meaning of it is” (14:91). Along with confessional and community initiatives, the new religious interpreters provide for forms of social welfare and assistance.<sup>103</sup> The combination of the provision of these services with indoctrination seems to be particularly effective (Mwangi 2012). As a result, the Italoophone Somalis maintain that the people or “the masses” are controlled, or bought into a certain rhetoric and mindset. “The system is always the same”, comments Cilmi, “they offer a level of welfare. They create their own ghetto where everybody lives and where they can control everybody. They have power because they have the power of ignorance over the ignorant” (14:68).

Indoctrination and brainwashing seem to be just part of wider strategy that is meant to control people’s thinking and reasoning, and to silence all possible criticism. From the Italoophone Somalis perspective, it looks like a fight over the masses’ mentality, a real *war on thinking*. In the words of Diric, a relative newcomer to the Somali diaspora based in Italy: “For years they have been killing doctors, generals, people from the intelligentsia, all those who are in a position to understand the situation, what is going on. They kill the intellectual so that nobody asks any question anymore. Those who can ask questions quickly disappear” (13:35). “They kill all important people,” echoes Maxamed, a returnee to Puntland (15:34). It is as if another war is being fought in Somalia, a sort of battle over the consciousness of the masses, a battle fought by opposing interpreters of the Somali Tradition.<sup>104</sup> On the one side is the westernized intelligentsia of the country—of which the Italoophone Somali diaspora is a part. On the other are the new religious interpreters of Islam in Somalia. Abdhullahi (2016, 2017) looks at it as the ongoing conflict between “non-Islamists” and “Islamists” elites, but the scale of the issue is much wider than that. I will expand on this in the coming chapters.

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<sup>103</sup> The various contributions of different authors are instructive here. On Al-Shabaab, see Hansen (2013), Mwangi (2012), and Marchal (2011, 2015). On Islamism (in general) in Somalia, see Saggiomo (2011), Østebø (2010), Le Sage and Menkhaus (2004). On the Islamic awakening in Somalia, see Elmi (2010), and on the Muslim Brotherhood in Somalia, see Hansen et al. (2017), Abdhullahi (2008, 2016). On Salafism and Wahhabism in Somalia, see Marchal and Sheikh (2015).

<sup>104</sup> By Tradition (with a “capital T”), I mean the principle of authority descending from time and repaeted over time. By traditions—plural and in the lower case—I refer to the various interpretations and practices embodied within the Somali Tradition. In Chapter 6 in particular, I will discuss more in-depth the all-embracing and all-legitimising notion of Somali Tradition by comparing it to the different interpretations and traditions that compete in the Somali arena.

## Concluding Remarks

As noted earlier, my interviewees tend to use this generic “they” whenever they refer to the more radical or non-ordinary interpreters. The level of vagueness the use of this term suggests can be tentatively interpreted from various perspectives. On the one hand, it is a way, as I have already shown, to keep a low profile. Italoophone Somalis are preoccupied with preventing themselves from being exposed to any possible retaliation, condemnation, or criticism. By doing so they explicitly avoid labelling - or even mentioning - any specific actor, apart from, sometimes, the Al-Shabaab. As already discussed, the latter often denote in fact “them” - the wider, amorphous group of unspecified radicals, extremists, and armed Islamists in Somalia today. Unquestionably, in the eyes of the Italoophone Somalis, Al-Shabaab are the most perturbing. Unsurprisingly they are as well the most mediatized among the new religious interpreters in the Somali arena, and for this reason, most probably, the main reference the Italoophone Somalis consider uncontroversial to mention. My interviewees usually keep clear from delving into the complication of making distinctions among groups and affiliations, beliefs and descending rules, values, and behaviours. I will discuss these aspects in more detail in Chapter 7.

On the other hand, the use of this generic “they” is an admission of ignorance, and maybe the refusal attached to it to investigate further all the intricacies of the new *religious landscape* in Somalia. It is in other words a hasty way to keep a safe distance and distinguish one’s own experience and understanding of Islam as opposed to the new (radical) interpreters, the non-ordinary Muslim, whoever they are and whatever their actual stance is. Most of my interviewees seem to look in fact at these new interpreters as if they were a continuum of nuances, on a scale of radicalism, where the final steps can easily escalate to physical and corporal violence.

Having described, from the perspective of the Italoophone Somali diaspora, the main actors of the Somali arena, the next chapter turns to focus on current forms of social control in Somalia—namely, the social institutions that Italoophone Somali diaspora considers relevant for social change.

## Chapter 6

# Somalia Today: The Dominant Institutions of Social Control

### Introducing Social Change and the “Inner World”

This chapter builds on the previous two, which analysed the socio-cultural background of this sub-group (Chapter 4) and the core actors they see as constituting the “main players” in the Somali arena of politics and society today (Chapter 5). Against this background, the present chapter takes social change—or, more precisely, the obstacles to it—as its focus, seeking to add a detailed analysis of the institutions of social control that bear upon the typical Somali person and determine how and where change can emerge. In so doing, it seeks to add another key element to the picture of social transformation as understood by today’s Italophone Somali diaspora.

Any reply to the question “how do you see social change in Somalia?” usually starts with an Italophone Somali diaspora member citing some impediment or limitation, or a lament on the irreversible power of this or that social institution.<sup>105</sup> To explain the tragic reality of life in Somalia today, my interlocutors often cite a lack of security and the absence of the rule of law, clan power dynamics, socio-economic challenges and the meddling in local affairs of foreign actors. At a deeper level, however, the dominant locus for social change (or lack thereof) as understood by the Italophone Somali diaspora reflects the workings of the key Somali institutions: the clans, religion and tradition. Each exercise a high degree of social power and control via the set of rules they embody that seek to regulate the society: the clan code, the traditional code, and the religious code.

Trying to make sense of my interviewees’ accounts, I am advancing a view of the Somali people as being constantly challenged by two orders of issues whenever social change, broadly speaking, is at stake. The first and most apparent of these pertains to the tangible or visible world—namely, the

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<sup>105</sup> I adopt here a “sociological” definition of social institutions, as per the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy: “contemporary sociologists use the term to refer to complex social forms that reproduce themselves such as governments, the family, human languages, universities, hospitals, business corporations, and legal systems.” Turner (1997: 6) offers a similar approach, defining the social institution as “a complex of positions, roles, norms and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organising relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems in producing life-sustaining resources, in reproducing individuals, and in sustaining viable societal structures within a given environment.” More [here](#) last retrieved 3 July 2018. Both Bulhan (2013a) and Lewis (2002:7) discuss the salience of Somali social institutions at length.

socio-economic and political realms. I have named this the “outer world”. By “outer world” I mean the world, as lived experience, in its dominant physical, visible, or quantifiable dimension. The second and most pervasive order of issues pertains instead to the intangible or private worlds—that is the socio-psychological realms. I have named this the “inner world”.<sup>106</sup> By “inner world”, I mean the world, as lived experience, in its dominant intangible and invisible dimension, as the site of meaning, emotions, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, moral and ethical issues, and memories. The latter is the site for everything that takes place in the hearts, the souls, and the minds of the people. Of course, the distinction between the two is never sharp and exclusive, the traffic between the two being self-evident. These two worlds however can be distinguished analytically, a useful exercise for the present research. Here, the analysis focuses particularly on the “inner world”, since it is the realm of thoughts, beliefs and meaning-making that has the greatest impact on the Italoophone Somali’s conception and experience of social change.

## **Social Institutions and Social Change**

Through an inductive, bottom-up, process of investigation, I have found that the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora understand social change primarily as a change in the social institutions that regulate, and sometimes determine, the life of the average Somalis. More specifically, these are *the clan system, religion, and tradition*. As touched upon above, transformations in the attributes and the pervasiveness of one or a combination of these social institutions is what Italoophone Somali diaspora members indicate as a marker of any possible process of social change. All three social institutions consists at root in a code, a set of written or unwritten rules that simultaneously call for a certain pattern of behavioural conduct and triggers identity claims. Social change is ultimately understood as a conversion in the nature and the quality of these institutions of *social control*, as I have named them.

Of the process of social change at stake here, the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora are sometimes *active enablers*, at others the *passive observers*, but never the beneficiaries or the passive recipients. As if they *did not need* to change or were immune to change, being change something that can only occur to others, over time, or that they only can bring about because those “left behind” –

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<sup>106</sup> In a much more elaborated and sophisticated way, Bulhan (2013a: 11–16) proposes a new analytical paradigm that he calls the “anatomy of the experience”. Here, he distinguishes between three worlds: the world of things (economics: development and distributions of resources), the world of people (politics: social relations and distribution of power), and the world of meaning (religion and psychology: beliefs, values, origin, destiny, and identity).

“the masses” as they refer to them – are in need of. Be that as it may, social change is most of the times perceived in the classical modernist meaning, that is typical of the development communication and cooperation sector, as a one way top-down process enacted by enlightened people who have experienced – allegedly - how things actually work (most of the time in a western context). However, I will come back to this later, when discussing the processes of social change in Chapter 9. For now, I am going to focus on the main social institutions governing social change. To this end, I will concentrate my attention on the “inner world”, as I have described it in the introduction to this chapter.

### The Three Social Institutions: An Overview

The mindset of Somalis—in the diaspora as well as back home—is constantly under challenge by certain mechanisms of social control that emerge directly from the main social institutions prevalent in the Somali society. Of course, this is not particular to the Somali people. Being exposed to various forms of social control and power is a common and recurring aspect of the human condition historically. These forms of social control tend to change over time and space, in quality and quantity, character and pervasiveness. As far as the Somalis are concerned, these forms can be systematically grouped under certain crosscutting “institutions” that seem to be particularly relevant in the Somali context. The importance that these forms of power have in shaping—often in highly determinative ways—people’s mentality, behaviour, or communication, goes well beyond what I had expected before commencing this research. First, I introduce these forms one by one. Then I will discuss some of their common features.

Somali society is organized into clans (about 50), which sometimes confederate, and can be grouped together under five or six clan families. **Clannism** entails a set of unwritten rules that emerge from belonging to a certain clan family,<sup>107</sup> confederation (two or more clans grouped together), and above all, membership in a specific clan and *diya*-paying group.<sup>108</sup> Clan affiliation though remains the main unit of political action, mobilization, and power dynamics, while the *diya*-paying group for financial issues, compensation, and the administration of justice. The clan system and the behavioural

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<sup>107</sup> The following are the main clan families in Somalia: the Darood, Dir, Isaaq, Hawiye in the Soomaali group, and the Digil and Rahanwiin in the Sab group.

<sup>108</sup> The *diya*-paying group is a contractual alliance to collectively receive or pay blood compensation (*diya*) for homicide or injury committed by or to members of the *diya*-paying group.

“rules” attached to it—the clan *code* as I refer to it—has been the subject of extensive studies for decades. The importance it plays in the everyday life and conduct of the average Somali is unquestioned.<sup>109</sup> The principle of authority relevant here is the clan itself, as an identity maker and definer, and is safeguarded by clan councils, chiefs, and sultans (Lewis 1999: 196–213).<sup>110</sup> The total genealogy directly connects the single clan member to his or her (Arab) ancestor across generations, in a long list of ancestors that individuals learn to recite by heart. The clan is the power of the group for *antonomasia*, as a mechanism of protection and marshalling. Loyalty to the group implies protection for its members but it can also contradict, silence, or oppose personal views and stances.

**Tradition and patriarchy** is that corpus of rules whose legitimacy primarily derives from the authority of what has come before and of memory, and is repeated over time. Tradition here is understood as the normative power of “how things used to be done”, understood, and settled, supposedly since time immemorial. In a still predominantly oral culture such as the Somali, most of these norms are passed down, from one generation to the next, through repetition, oral accounts, and taboos. These norms can be associated with the *xeer* (Somali customary law), nomad and agro-pastoral (cultural) habits, dietary prescriptions, the relation of dominance and service between men and women, and so on. I refer to them collectively as the traditional code. Of course these types of norms often overlap with the clan code and the religious code (to be discussed further below), with the distinctions between them being more analytical than real. Yet, for the purposes of this research, I focus as much as possible on these aspects of the Somali social and communal life from a secular perspective.<sup>111</sup> In addition, I look at the code of tradition as being validated by the wise, the elders, the patriarchs, as witnesses of time—guardians and repositories of this knowledge and code of conduct – while it is enacted mostly by women. These social figures used to supervise the respect of the rule within the family, the nomadic community, and in the village, over the people from the pasturelands and the rural areas, and before urbanization took over. Their role is now challenged by modern processes of urbanization and sedentarization, when they are from a nomadic context, or by globalization and novel trade flows, when they are from an agro-pastoral and sedentary community.

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<sup>109</sup> Readers may usefully consult the seminal texts on the most far-reaching implications of this Somali social institution, including Cerulli (1964), Cassanelli (1982), Laitin and Samatar (1987), Mansur (1995), Lewis (1999, 2002), Luling (2006), Bulhan (2009, 2013a), Kapteijns (2013).

<sup>110</sup> The Sultan is the head of the clan. As pinpointed by Lewis (1999: 203) “the office of Sultan for a clan or sub-clan where the clan is large is the only truly traditional titular political office”.

<sup>111</sup> On the conflation of religion and culture, especially pertinent among women, see, for instance, Smith (2014).

**Islam and the new religious interpreters' dominant interpretation** is the set of rules—the religious code—deriving from the religious message and the currently dominant, or apparently dominant, interpretation of Islam. The authority here stems from the Quran, the Shari'ah, the relevant theological schools, the sheikhs and the *wadaads* (Lewis 1999: 213–233),<sup>112</sup> the *qadi*,<sup>113</sup> and their respective levels of social appeal. It is the code of conduct in religious matters and well beyond, in a Muslim society such as Somali, where secular and spiritual spheres, politics and religion, pre-Islamic and Islamic tradition intertwine. It is the power of Islam in all its declinations and provisions, against which the living practice of the 'devoted' Somali Muslim is constantly compared, validated or disqualified.

The average Somali is continuously exposed to the power of these social institutions, and has to come to terms with the provisions and the precepts that originate from each one of their respective codes: the clan code, the traditional code, and the religious code. Of course it would be particularly demanding, and maybe even pointless, to seek to precisely ascribe a given rule, prescription, or moral precept, solely and exclusively to one and only one of these forms of social control. Nevertheless, I have tried to organize my reasoning around these three code sources based on the accounts received by interviews with members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora. More generally, for now, I present their common features, as I have briefly described them in the following paragraph.

First, these institutions manifest as **codes of rules**. In other words, each institution of social control is comprised of a given set of rules. These rules can entail obligations, expectations, and suggestions, formally or informally codified—in most cases unwritten—that direct, drive, influence, inspire, and contain the individual conduct in the social and the family sphere. Second, they are **historically determined**. All forms of social control under consideration here are subject to a process of change that marks their historical dimension. Tradition itself, the most conservative of these forces, actually undergoes a continuous process of adjustment to the always-moving current times. The same is true for clannism, which is exposed to the development of a new economic structure, and the progressive replacement of the nomadic herding culture. The same holds true for Islam, and its continuous process of diversification, reform, radicalization, and laicization. These processes progress very slowly, sometimes giving the impression that these forms of power are actually fixed, monolithic, above and beyond history. However, they all are subject to the corrosive and altering nature of time.

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<sup>112</sup> The man of religion and of God (the *wadaad*) as opposed to the warrior, the spear-bearer (the *waranlele*), a traditional division in Somali pastoral society. For more detail, see Lewis (1999: 27).

<sup>113</sup> The title given to the judge presiding in a Muslim court.

Third, they are **intangible**. These forms of social control are under investigation here in their intangible dimension. Their implications for the physical sphere, for the “outer world”, including the challenges to which the average Somali is “physically” exposed in his or her everyday life are not addressed here. For the purposes of this chapter I focus on the intangible, incorporeal, and moral dimension of these forms of social control, which contribute to explain the current state of affairs in Somalia today (and in the diaspora). In other words, I give prevalence to the life of the Somalis in the “inner world”, in the sphere of consciousness, emotions, fears, desires, values, and beliefs.

Fourth, they have **sanctioning power**. The forms of social control that are to be observed in the Somali society are associated with a sanctioning power that goes hand in hand with them, a way to control and validate or disqualify the conduct of the people. This sanctioning power may differ in intensity, gravity, and implications, from institution to institution but all of them exhibit it.

Fifth, they have a **collective dimension**. All institutions of social control under investigation here ultimately derive their sanctioning power from the collectivity, the community of people, the family, and the group of belonging. Their members’ assembly has a weight that goes beyond the sum of the parts, whether this is the umma—the followers of a certain school of interpretation of Islam—or the members of the clan family, and then the clan, the sub-clan, or the *diya*-paying group. It could also be the repositories of tradition, the family and the extended family, the community and the village, and the nomadic culture. Whatever the case, it is all about the morality and the ethos of the group, if not its interests, that supersede that of the individual. Differently from the liberal individualistic tradition of the western world, the collective ethos is quite relevant among the Somalis, or at least it is supposed to be this way *publicly*.

Rephrasing a striking point that was made by one of my interviewees—“we live in what the group allows” (Ayaan 17:173, more in the following chapter)—the universal human need for approval and validation from a group of peers appears particularly strong within Somali society. This is extremely important if we want to understand the leverage that these forms of power have over the average Somali. And this is also extremely important if we want to understand the power of sanctions, that all these forms of social control, or mass control, share in common with each other. To the point that these sanctions, whenever they occur or are just threatened, work as a general overwhelming impediment towards (social) change.

Indeed, the present research is about social change through (development) communication, in the meaning that I have proposed in my theoretical chapter. It is a process that takes place at the

individual and diffused level, if at all. In fact, for this type of social change—as understood by the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora—to occur, people need to be able to express their inner thoughts and beliefs as freely as possible. A new ethics conducive to freedom of choice, conscience, and respect for behaviours that could deviate significantly from the groove of Tradition, any tradition, must gain legitimacy. With it, a new (old) oratory—such as a renewed Somali art of public speaking—must regain space. However, for this to happen there must be a shift or redistribution in the value attributed to the “reasons of the group” as compared to the “instances” of the individual. All along this process of *institutional* change, the collective and the individual ethos necessarily confront each other while attempting a viable compromise. Some may look at this as a clash between individual liberalism—as a principle typical of the western world (and that the Italoophone Somali diaspora members are bearers of)—and a more collective, or communal ethos. Yet, to look at it as such would be overly reductionist, as will become clearer in the coming chapters.

Whatever the case may be, for such a process to be triggered, the individual needs to feel confident to challenge the dominant and the group, a minority must challenge a (supposed?) majority. However, as long as the sanctioning power remain strong and pervasive this can only happen in the folds of the inner thoughts, of the private life, abroad, and maybe in the diaspora, provided that the community power is not too pervasive even there. I will discuss this more in depth in Chapter 7. In the remainder of this chapter, I will look deeper into these mechanisms of social control and discuss more in details their sanctioning power.

## **Clannism**

Many members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora—be they returnees or long-term diaspora members—look at the clan as the most irreversible (but also the most challenging) aspect of Somali culture. In addition, they look at it with resignation, as something ineluctable, inescapable, or insurmountable.<sup>114</sup> The clan is stronger than the religion—indeed it “comes before religion”, as they frequently note. Everybody admits that the clan has an impact on the mentality of the people, and of the individual. Men and women in their accounts they both highlight this aspect while attempting some explanations. They point out at the fact that clannism or tribalism, as they call it sometimes, is

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<sup>114</sup> This is consistent with what Bulhan (2013a: 225-240) discusses in the chapter of his book entitled “Clan Cult and Pastoral Ethos”.

something that people “have in their blood”, their harshest challenge. Diric, a permanent diaspora member who belongs to a younger generation, is extremely effective at describing how the commitment to clan is resistant to change and is robust across time and circumstance:

The Somalis are very spirited people; they are very good at talking, at telling you stories. Sometimes they profess to be enemies of the clan, telling you that they have overcome all divisions, that they talk to everybody; but actually, deep down, the clan continues to dominate and to count, in their choices, in their decisions, in their wars (13:10).

Moreover, he continues with a focus on leaders, feeling perhaps the urge to attribute the responsibilities of tribalism to the clan chiefs rather than ordinary folk, as if he wanted to deflect blame from them. He sounds as if the clan system is something slightly extraneous to his life, which is probably due to his relatively younger age, and he puts the terms of the problem in this way:

The clan chiefs for each clan are different; they have different titles [variously given as] Uгаа, Sultan, Malaq, Imam, and so on. These are the figures that should be held accountable. These people have the power; nothing can happen, or you cannot do anything without their consent [...]. They are powerful, extremely powerful [although] they lack education and they have never worked (13:9).

From a completely different perspective, another returnee, Aaden, puts forward a different interpretation, which is more economically and materialistically determined. He says: “we are in a period of economic transition, when all the economic structure of Somalia is undergoing change. Change in the political scene will surely follow. For now, pastoralism is dominant and clannism is based on pastoralism” (22:84). In other words, if we take this interpretation at face value, the clan system is bound to dominate the political and social scene of Somalia for some years (if not decades) to come—at least until a change in the “economic structure” takes place. In the view of some others, however, this will never actually occur. They put forward a more anthropological explanation based on which the Somali identity is so ingrained with the clanic dimension that can hardly be superseded. Cilmi puts forward this analysis and proposal, whereby each clan is assigned its own place:

Somalia is a big country, the land at disposal is huge; we do not need to be obliged to share this land. By tradition, the Somalis know how to dismantle the tents. Since they have this possibility [of packing up the settlement and moving], they never had to insist on a given piece of land and they have never learned how to reach common agreements. In fact, we lack the

capacity to set up associations that are genuinely transversal, or that have a real common goal (14:8).

While I have often registered this type of comment, it has also been claimed that many Somali are actually in denial about it. As the Italoophone diaspora representatives assert, Somalis often refuse to acknowledge the divisive and pervasive impacts that the clan logic and the clan system have on them, assuming that their individual point of view or their clan-based particularistic reasons are well founded and more legitimate and justified than that of others. My interviewees recount that a “negationist culture” is widespread among Somalis, both in the diaspora and back home. As a matter of fact, those among my interviewees who conceded that the clan was actually a great problem to overcome did so as if under confession, as if disclosing it to a stranger. Maybe they allowed themselves to make this type of revelation to a complete outsider (such as myself) since such a person has no stake at all in the politics of confrontation, the core issue of the Somali society. They would never make such a confession in front of other Somalis, especially when they are not friends or they do not belong to the same clan. Again, in the words of Aaden:

Many are fiercely against the theories of Ioan Lewis, also many intellectuals, who have studied. They do not accept him, because he talks about tribalism. But you cannot eliminate the clan only because you do not like to talk about it, when you know perfectly well that it has a fundamental role (22:74).<sup>115</sup>

In other words, clan and clannism seem to have an impact that many Somalis are purportedly very reluctant to admit to themselves. My interviewees within the Italoophone Somali diaspora claim that only the most ‘illuminated’ among them are prepared to concede its strength and its fundamental role in Somali society today. However, all concerned seem to agree on one point—namely, the ineluctability and inescapability of the clan. In Somalia as well as in the diaspora, as Uba claims: “There are people who want to change but they are the most clannist, they feel protected in this way. Actually, I expected that many of these people from the diaspora, having lived in a western context and having studied, would have developed different ideas” (24:54).

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<sup>115</sup> Ioan Lewis is generally credited as the first scholar (and outsider) to have fully appreciated and revealed the role of the clan, with all its implications, to western and Somali audiences alike. Of course, this claim is debateable.

### *Clan Belonging and Education as Components of Social Identity*

The clan is the Somalis' enlarged family. The clan is their *identity card* and *travel document*—their *laissez-passer*, in other words. As one returnee put it: “In Garowe, I belong to the people of the clan living there. You can't take two steps without people wanting to know to which clan you belong, therefore I feel secure and accepted” (22:92). I have interviewed one interlocutor who proposes to stretch the concept to the extreme, by including the clan affiliation on the identity card. Cilmi, in an attempt to exorcise or just acknowledge the power of the clan and its implications in terms of social control proposes the following: “I would bring this to its logical extreme—we should indicate the clan of belonging on the identity card. [This would be] something like saying ‘let's legalize drugs’; it is not necessary, *a priori*, that everybody agrees, that everybody sits at the same table” (14:10).

The clan works as the comfort zone,<sup>116</sup> the origin, and the destiny for many Somalis. It is there to permeate everybody's life, whatever his or her level of education. As Uba points out, “the culture of the clan is still strong, be you a PhD or just an ignorant [person]” (24.54).<sup>117</sup> It is a phenomenon that transversally affects everybody. Filsan, a permanent diaspora member based in Italy, remarks: “Even the most educated, those who have studied, and who hold the reins of the country, the various presidents and ministers [are affected]” (28:9).

These comments warrant a brief explanatory digression. Two elements seem to define Somalis' socio-political status, in Somalia as well as in the diaspora: the clan of belonging and the level of education. Quite strikingly, I have noted how often the identity claim associated with a certain clan goes hand in hand with the level of education of the given person, as if the two social coordinates would allow for a proper social positioning of the person. Uba, now based in the UK, previously a resident in Italy, says: “[T]hey are a bit brain-addled as I call them—‘*bacati di capo come dico io*’. We do not get along very well. As soon as they meet you, they immediately ask two things: which Khabila<sup>118</sup> you belong to and what your level of education is” (24:13).

Clan and level of education thus define the socio-political positioning of the average Somali, at least as it surfaces from my interviewees' accounts. They work as social coordinates that, in a snapshot, give an idea of the profile under consideration, and help place the Somali in social space both vertically

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<sup>116</sup> Bulhan (2013: 301) speaks about a “Protective Factor”.

<sup>117</sup> I have touched upon the relevance of formal educational qualifications in the Somali context for status and social capital in Chapter 4.

<sup>118</sup> Alternatively, *qabiil*, which in Somali means “the clan”.

and horizontally. Once, in a pure pastoral society—the one described in depth by Lewis and followers—people were easily “identified” based on their provenance. Today, because of urbanization, internal movements, resettlement policies, civil war, and migration a completely new political context has arisen. That, and the advent of the Somali diaspora, mean that the claim of being able to place someone in the old *pastoral arena*—and hence to fully understand their proximity, interests, and political agenda—is much more difficult. Additionally, another important variable—i.e. the level of education—seems to have intervened as an indicator of cultural and social capital, sometimes beyond clan lines.

Within this context, whenever a Somali chances on another Somali, and initially interacts with her or him, she or he instinctively sketches a profile of the new interlocutor as we all do in general in various ways in our encounters with the other. This profile works as an anticipation of the background and of the socio-political views of the encountered individual. Hastily, this sketch helps in answering the pressing question of the rough identification of the encountered person as a (potential) friend or foe. This is probably due to the extreme need Somalis have to anticipate social interactions—in particular, the stance, agenda or thinking of whoever he or she is engaging with. This need arises from the scepticism and mistrust that pervades Somali society today (Bulhan 2013a: 71, Lewis 2008: 25–25), one in which opening oneself up—even to close family and friends—carries significant risk. Hence, disclosed or undisclosed clan affiliations still determine the way the average Somali approaches and *sees* the other, the neighbour. These words, recounted to me by Diric, offer an example of this attitude: “You talk like that because [...] you say so but in reality, I know who you actually support and why, and if you support this or that, it’s because they belong to your clan, not because they deserve it”.

Right or wrong, the clan affiliation is the main variable upon which the Somalis make rapid judgements and interpret the social reality around them. It works like a beaten track in their mind—a pattern in their reasoning—that is stubbornly resistant to change, especially when the outer world, in a vicious circle, nurtures and perpetuates this same mentality. As my interlocutors would have it, all Somalis—be they young or old, well educated or less so—are subject to this institution of social control.

The level of educational attainment is the second term of this binomial, if not trinomial identity. Among the older generations, a qualification—especially those from reputed international institutions and universities—acts as a proxy for *distinction*, in the sense that Bourdieu has discussed at length

(1979, 1986). During my contacts with the Italoophone Somali diaspora, I have often registered the expression “he is a PhD”. Expressed in this way, “having” something entails “being” something—cultural capital is thus transformed into social identity. Having a PhD thus implies having reached some kind of pinnacle, the highest level of cultural and socio–political maturity. For some of my interviewees this might mean as well to conform to the hegemonic cultural capital (and elite) of the western world.<sup>119</sup>

Finally, there is a third identifier or dimension that helps place the ‘encountered’ Somali in socio–political space. This is religious belonging or orientation. Actually, this dimension was never made explicit by any of my interviewees. It is, however, most salient for the typical Somali today as will become clearer in this chapter and the chapters that follow. The average Somali is constantly alerted by the need to guess her or his interlocutor’s religious affiliation. This dimension works as a hidden, unspeakable or unmentionable component of their social identity. If my interlocutors dared to take sides or disclose the quality of their being Muslim, they never dared to do so concerning others. I will discuss this more in details in the following sections.

### *Clannism and the Superiority/Inferiority Complex*

As mentioned, a mix of anticipations, pre-warnings, prejudices, and defence strategies accompanies the encounter with the other in the Somali society. An ingredient of this mix, with far-reaching implications, seems to be an *inferiority/superiority complex*, as I observed on many occasions. This aspect might also be linked to the purported *nobility* of the Somalis (Laitin 1977: 30, Lewis 2002, Ahad 2008). Most Somalis take pride in belonging to a given clan family, clan, or sub-clan, and from their *Somaliness* more generally (Bulhan 2009, 2013a: 225–240, Lewis 2002: 16, Laitin 1977: 29–37). This pride is the result of a supposed common shared history, be it of force and domination, or of grief and grievances, or both mixed together. Pride also reflects a shared sense of the battle that the clan has engaged on behalf of all its members over the environment and for the survival of its members. Clan and survival are strictly related in this sense: “you survive if you stick to the clan”. The clan is supposed to look after the needs of all its associates. A Somali proverb says, “If you do not know the country you will get lost, if you do not know the people you will go hungry” (Cassanelli 1982: 9). This was even truer when the society was entirely pastoral.

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<sup>119</sup> Perhaps this can be traced to a sort of colonial inferiority complex among those so occupied and colonised, as investigated at length by Franz Fanon.

Today, at the time of urbanization, global trade, and communications, clan bonds appear to have attenuated, as they prove less essential in providing for the sustenance and the survival of all its members. Yet, as a few scholars point out and lament at the same time, the clan proves crucial more than ever (Bulhan 2013a, Kapteijns 2013, Abdhullahi 2017). Clan belonging matters all the more in a country where a full and open accounting of the offences committed on all sides during civil war remains elusive and the wounds of the conflict have yet to truly heal (Kapteijns 2013, Abdhullahi 2017).

Not all clans have the same reputation or features, though. There are those traditionally more inclined to politics, and those more given to business. Some clans have fought a supremacy war against each other; others have suffered the consequences of the conflict from all sides. Other minority clans or groups lament any sort of discrimination throughout the entire Somali history. For one reason or another people feel attached to their clan or sub-clan's shared history. Be it a story of access to power, ruling skills, and cultural capital, or the dignified obedience to the rule of the strongest and apparent surrender.

In its social, outwards implications, this sense of pride sometimes shades, more controversially, into chauvinism and a sense of superiority. That posture can include the inner (maybe even shaky) belief that “since you are inferior, I will be ruling over you” (5:56). The Italoophone Somalis claim that this is considered a recurring temptation among individuals and clans in Somalia. On more than one occasion during my interviews, people while getting emotional for this or that reasons, started to disclose more politically incorrect and reposed thoughts, which always sounded to me as a claim for the grievances of their respective clan or clan family. Statements such as those reported below—all, quite strikingly, received from women—well epitomize how clannism (still?) permeates the mentality of some of my interviewees. Caaisho, for example, says:

[O]ur clan is one of the best in Somalia, we are a religious clan, and very beautiful people, although people only know about \*\*\* [she mentions the name of three major clan families], but my background is \*\*\* [she mentions her own clan name] (26:33).

Jamilah, instead, observes:

Sure, also among the \*\*\* [she mentions a major clan family] there are people who are well prepared and competent, but the \*\*\* [she mentions her own clan] are more competent [and

as well] the \*\*\* are proud of marrying four women, of ruling, of being in charge” (25:74, 25:90)

We can conclude with a final example from Beydaan, who states “those from \*\*\* have always presumed themselves to be superior” (3:67).

These types of narrative—be they self-depictions, or socially generated attributes—confirm the general attitude that most clan and sub-clans adopt towards each other, in a never-ending claim game. The underpinning categories, superior and inferior, are confrontational in nature. They seem to embody an enduring self-defence strategy that has framed the encounter with the other since time immemorial. However, they also seem to address another need, which I have already mentioned in the previous paragraph; the need to place oneself concerning the other, to attribute a ranking, be it social, political or economic. This appears to be a recurring pattern of social behaviour among the Italoophone Somalis. There is a constant tension at the crossroads with the other. This tension is generated by a sustained process of positioning, based on the social identity coordinates discussed above, of who is superior and who is inferior, who can rule and who has to obey, who has a say, and who has to silently listen. In other words, an understanding of the Somalis that clashes quite significantly with that widely held notion of “pastoral democracy” and purported egalitarianism that has been put forward on several occasions (Lewis 1999, Laitin & Samantar 1987, Laitin 1977). Maybe, this notion holds true within the clan, but not outside the clan.<sup>120</sup>

In general, this type of attitude, and the need to frame the encounter with the other in terms of superiority/inferiority, is somehow universal. Yet, among the Somalis, it seems to acquire extra weight. It might also be an indicator of the importance (and impact) that others’ reciprocal opinions and judgements have on the average Somali. It is a strikingly recurrent theme, with far richer implications than can be presented at this point. These implications, in terms of fear and coping strategies, will be addressed in greater detail in the coming chapters.

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<sup>120</sup> Cumar, this time in his capacity as an interlocutor, touched upon the issue in an email sent to me in October 2017. He wrote: “Remember, dear Michele, that a society divided into clans, sub-clans, and sub-sub-sub clans will never become a nation in the true sense of the term [...]. Let’s put aside all these slogans on the alleged linguistic and religious homogeneity of the Somalis, which the scholars, especially the foreign ones, tend to propagate”.

## Tradition and Patriarchalism

Somali society, like any other, is characterized by its forms of cultural heritage, customs, and traditions. Always a patrilineal and patriarchal society, over the centuries it has developed a sort of syncretism across intervening layers of cultural influence. Historical phases have followed one after the other, while leaving behind valued objects and values, ideas and norms. The Somalis have experienced, among other influences, pre-Islamic worship and habits, Islamic conversion, pastoralism and other more sedentary forms of sustenance, anti-colonialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism, Scientific Socialism, parliamentarianism and federalism, Islamic revival, Salafism, and Wahhabism (Cerulli 1964, Laitin 1977, Mansur 1980, Cassanelli 1982, Lewis 1999, Lewis 2002, Bulhan 2013a, Bulhan 2013b, Abdhullahi 2016).

In a pure theoretical exercise, I propose to consider tradition here that set of rules that have been associated with Tradition—with “a capital T” to denote the Somali tradition in general—by the Italo-phone Somali diaspora themselves. These rules are not immediately or directly ascribable neither to the religious domain nor to the clan *strictu sensu* or at least they have been mentioned and discussed by my interviewees as mere Tradition in the first instance. Actually, it would be very difficult, and maybe pointless, to attempt to distinguish “pure tradition” from what is rather a mere religious or clanic issue. As I have stated, it is essentially a methodological exercise and a way to present as distinct in written a corpus of norms that is much more mixed and intricate in reality.

Therefore, I would cautiously list the following elements under the umbrella of Tradition: *xeer*; customs; the role and power of the elders; rules and habits for the management of resources and of disputes; the roles of men and women (and the patterns of burden sharing between them); patriarchalism; gender; sexuality; and dress code. These aspects are sometimes revised with new provisions stemming from the religious domain, or an updated interpretation of the religious message. At other times, they can be associated more directly with the clan system—the damage compensation system for instance, the *djya*-paying group (see more below)—or to pastoralism, as it has always been understood and practiced. Essentially, codes and rules falling under the broad rubric of Tradition usually represent a compromise—that is, an attempt to adjust an old rule, whose origin remains lost in time, to a (relatively) new context.

Broadly speaking, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, the Somali Tradition is the result of intervening layers of cultural influence—“dislocations” as Bulhan labels them (2013a). The pre-Islamic Cushitic tradition has been integrated with—and ultimately modified by—the Islamic one

(Cassanelli 1982). The Islamic tradition as traditionally understood by the Somalis (Sunni Islam and an inheritance of Sufi practice), has in turn been partially dislocated by what the Italoophone Somalis view as the new religious interpretations that have (re)gained space and legitimacy in the Somali context (Marchal and Sheikh 2015, Abdhullahi 2016). As Guuleed summarizes well, tradition and Islam are deeply intertwined:

You cannot separate the cultural fact from the religious fact! Somalis have an Islamic culture and a traditional culture. Now, the traditional culture is beautiful, also in the tales and the legends passed down by the nomadic elders who used to give 100 camels as a dowry for a daughter. But now there is also Islam, and the dowry is also part of the Islamic culture, hence the pre-Islamic and the Islamic culture add to one another (10:45).

Tradition is conservative by definition. It forcefully resists anyone attempting to change it. Its relevance for the society as a whole in whatever process of transformation is quite incontrovertible. Yet the relation between time and tradition is ultimately paradoxical. On the one hand, time is what gives tradition weight in society—“it is, because it has always been thus”. On the other, time bears relentlessly on Tradition, seeking to shift and mould it. The paradox comes to the fore whenever different understandings of an element of Tradition are brought into open contention. Tradition thus proves less monolithic and univocal than one might otherwise think. The members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora in fact seem to be the bearers of a form of tradition that is in open competition with the tradition of the Somalis “back home”. The main challenges they confront as they strive to bring about change “back home” are indicators of this clash between competing traditions and contending understandings of the same traditional practice or principle. We now turn to a more thorough discussion of this clash between tradition and social change.

### *Tradition versus Social Change*

As said, the role played by the Somali Tradition, as I have laid it out above, spans many domains. The Italoophone Somali diaspora assume that various aspects of the socio-cultural environment they grew up in remains part of the Somali Tradition. Here, they mean aspects like organization of the family and the community, rules governing disputes across clan and sub-clans—including the institution of the *dijya*-paying group—the condition of women, or the stance towards gays and lesbians. In other words, we are speaking of all those aspects of social life that are perceived as having been regulated over the time in a certain crystallized way.

Despite all this, the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora are quite aware that their historically determined experience of Tradition—in time and space, and across social class—may actually pose a challenge to social change today. New and old rules, institutions, and patterns need to be overcome if social change is to be brought about. The problem does not lie solely with the challenges per se, but also with those who interpret and carry Tradition as a public discourse. The Italoophone Somali diaspora's perspective is thus not itself monolithic or uniform. There are aspects of the Tradition that even they would never question, dimensions they are keen to see shift, some to which they are indifferent, and others again that they share with those back home. It would be quite difficult to trace an accurate and loyal overview of the individual nuances. Nevertheless, in the following paragraphs, I have cautiously grouped and summarized the most recurring positions as expressed by my interviewees.

### *Customs and Responsibility*

Most of my interviewees claim that the Somali culture remains essentially nomadic and “audio-oral” (20:10)—namely, as circulating by word of mouth. Connected to this, they acknowledge that it remains a predominantly *pastoral culture*. Yet, as one interviewee observed “you cannot stop progress, even as a compromise is needed between tradition and innovations that move the society forward” (21:19). Within this context, the adoption of a critical approach towards the *xeer*—the customary law that for centuries has regulated disputes and social responsibilities among the Somalis—would entail the striking of a new compromise between opposing principles, individualism and communalism. Mentioning the *xeer* inevitably invokes the *dinya*-paying group and all those institutions that are brought to bear when compensation for damages is sought. Many of my interviewees believe that such institutions, which were born in a nomadic, pastoral context, are not suited to an urban one. Sagal, who is based in the United Kingdom, recounts how this disconnect plays out in practice through an event she witnessed during one visit to Somalia:

I was in Somalia, and I witnessed a car accident downtown. In Somalia, there is no insurance for civil liability and so I thought: ‘now what will happen?’ One of the people involved told me ‘don’t worry, my Khabila [clan] is my insurance’. It works like that here [...]. There is the *dinya*, [and] it is very beautiful, sure, but it does not work in a city because in a city everybody does whatever he wants! (5:31).

My interviewees often recount this idea of established rules conflicting with modern society. It is as a way to point to what they would consider the “backwardness” of certain social forms that are seen to be out of place in a modern, developed, urbanized context. Along the same lines, Ladan, a permanent diaspora member based in Italy, recalls the Somali adage “*la jiiŋyaana banana*”, which means “you may also lay it down” (29:8). This refers to the well-known anecdote about a cow that goes to pasture on the property of another family, which is protected by a fence. The offended party then asks the judge—or *qadi*, known proverbially as the “Qaali Huurshe” or “the one who makes you sweat”—to determine rightful compensation. Based on the judge’s decision, the owners of the unlawfully grazing cow must compensate the “offended” party with an amount of grain<sup>121</sup> equal to the height of his stick. Yet as soon as the Qadi is reminded that it is from *his* herd that the offending cow comes, he reviews the sentence, stating that “it is also lawful to lay the stick”.<sup>122</sup> The source of unending arguments between the parties, Ladan recalls, lies in this equivocal judgement about whether this compensation has to be calculated vertically, horizontally, or somewhere in between. She questions how this norm could apply in an urban context and for similar events. The same applies in the diaspora, whenever there are confrontations, and Somalis reciprocally claim damages between groups and clans (29:25). Once more, my interviewees look at the way this type of dispute is regulated—namely with rules and precepts from an older, pastoral context—with a certain level of scepticism and, indeed, disapproval.

Probably this is an undercurrent, common to many of my interviewees, which shows their progressive replacement of the principle of collective responsibility with the individual one. There is a strong belief, in other words, that as long as the individual is not held accountable for his behaviour, deeds or conduct, there is little scope for change and improvement in Somali society as a whole, in the diaspora as well as back home. At the beginning of this chapter, I touched upon this aspect when discussing the *collective dimension* of the institutions of mass control and the opposing principles between collective and individual responsibility. Actually, the Scientific Socialism agenda tentatively addressed this very issue already at the beginning of the 1970s, at least in its propaganda claims.<sup>123</sup> The question resurfaces here, but I will come back to it in the following chapters.

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<sup>121</sup> Alternatively, corn, wheat, lentils, depending on the particular variation of the anecdote.

<sup>122</sup> The episode is also quoted in *La Femme Somalienne et la Construction Socialiste* (Political Bureau of the Presidency of the Somali Revolutionary Council, Female Section 1975: 17) as an example of the confusion, and the need for clarity, to which the new Family Law (1975) was meant to remedy.

<sup>123</sup> A clear reference to this aspect is to be found in Siad Barre’s speech “The teacher in society” of 30 October 1970: “We have abolished dia payments because it led to division among the people. [...] If a person has killed another, why is he not held responsible for murder? The tribe should not pay for the action of the criminal” (Barre 1971: 19–20).

## *Diet and Other Taboos*

Many members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora claim that the uncompromising beliefs associated with everyday life practices, such as diet and nutrition, are another recurring impediment towards social change. Gurey, who is permanently based in the United Kingdom, while describing this aspect, makes a very strong and precise statement about those who remained in Somalia: “The main challenges they face are lack of economic resources, deep rooted cultural beliefs, and religious taboos” (8:5). Asked for more detail, he adds:

By culture beliefs and taboos, I mean the harmful traditional medical practices like FGM [female genital mutilation], the use of fire to treat sick children, abuse of women’s rights within the family, [and] mistaken food habits, such as eliminating fish from the diet. All these and other beliefs are socially accepted culture and mistaken misappropriation and interpretation of the religion (8:16).

Gurey is a physician by training, a background that he shares with many other members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora, as I have detailed in Chapter 4. Training in modern medicine was, indeed, a priority during the AFIS period and the post-independence regimes that followed. It was a core part of the mandate of the Somali National University when it was established *de facto* in 1973.<sup>124</sup> Among the Italoophone Somali diaspora generally—but specifically among the doctors—the idea that those back home still observe a diet that is poor in fish—a by-product of the old cultural opposition between nomads and farmers/fishers—is quite widespread. Maxamed, now relocated back to Puntland, makes exactly this point:

Most of the gastro-intestinal problems that these people face are caused by their diet and nutrition habits, which are in turn determined by their concept of nutrition. There is a cultural difference [between their diet and] my diet... (15:28).

As I have shown, from an Italoophone Somali diaspora perspective, the implications of Tradition for social change—as the general principle of authority descending from time and repeated over time—

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<sup>124</sup> The Faculty of Medicine of the SNU was an offspring of the original Scuola Medica, which was, in fact, the very nucleus of the university as it evolved. The faculty was consolidated in the early 1970s thanks to the contribution of Giorgio Giacomelli (then Ambassador to Somalia), Paride Stefanini (an Italian surgeon who was responsible for the Scuola Medica during those years) and Gianni Sampietro, who was the main engine of the operation and coordinator of Somali-Italian relations at the time. Finally, Gianni Mauro was the first coordinator on site.

can be quite diverse. These aspects include customs and habits in the field of disputes and damage compensation as well as in the field of diet and nutrition. The same holds true within the family circle, in terms of respect that is due to the family as an institution and the patriarch at its head. Without any doubt, women are particularly affected by these rules. In the following subsection, I address this more fully.

### *Traditional vs Unconventional Women*

Broadly speaking, tradition is a male-dominated or determined affair. It has a strong masculine character, and yet paradoxically it is mostly implemented and enacted by women. In other words, tradition often corresponds to the rules, the values, and the behaviours that *men* have devised and codified *for women*. Not without reason, tradition often immediately recalls gender issues, at least in the common (modern) understanding we have of the concept. Here we are speaking of what women were subject to before modern society supposedly “emancipated” them from the strictures and unwritten rules of patriarchal traditions.

Somalia is no exception. Tradition and patriarchalism seem to particularly affect Somali women, also concerning all those issues that, directly or indirectly, are connected to the sexual sphere. According to Italoophone Somalis, this is not a merely religious matter, but it involves the Somali culture as a whole. Currently Somalia is experiencing a sort of revival of the authority of patriarchs, elders—in short, male rulers (Gardner and El-Bushra 2017). From the Italoophone Somali perspective, a particular understanding of this Tradition is “making a comeback”. Or, more accurately, a new course is superseding the older one that my Italoophone Somali interlocutors once experienced growing up.

Tradition with a capital “T” appears to have acquired a greater salience and authority than ever before during this most recent conservative turn. The Italoophone Somalis claim that the attention that the Somali people, in particular those back home, pay towards these rules, at least in the public sphere, seems to be unprecedented in the Somali society, and still on the rise. To complicate matters further, the distinction between the bearers of the old system of values and the new faithful interpreters is not always so sharp and well defined. Sometimes, the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora are themselves the forces of reaction and conservatism rather than of modernism, to use two categories that they seem to have assimilated. It is, in fact, in these terms that they use to frame the discussion and to make sense of what is going on around them.

Within this framework, any woman having some sort of diasporic experience is exposed to a series of extra challenges. The West being often considered *the* source of corruption of the Somali original culture—or just labelled so by the new interpreters—means that those coming from the West, and women more than men, are perceived as potential “bearers of contamination”, as pointed out also by Hammond (2015: 61–62). The Italoophone Somalis claim that the West is often regarded by the “true” interpreters of the Tradition as a place of unbridled liberty and pleasure, and as a consequence a place of decadence and immorality. Diaspora Somali women recount that they have to come to terms with this kind of prejudice, which seriously affects them whenever they interact with fellow diasporans or people back home. Sagal depicts quite well the situation and the challenges she is confronted with as a woman:

[I]n Somalia, from north to south, the first impression that everybody has of you is that you are a woman that comes from the western world [and] that you have [therefore] enjoyed certain liberties. [They assume] that you have managed to gain the upper hand over men, who have lost most of their power because the law in the western world [supposedly] promotes women. If she has been in the West, a woman [is seen as having] enjoyed too much freedom. They all [the conservatives] have this kind of obsession. In fact, divorce has increased a lot in the diaspora, and the role of men has been superseded (5:33).

In other words, beyond the kinds of challenges all Somali women face in a patrilineal and patriarchal society, the women of the Somali diaspora confront the added charge that they have somehow breached Tradition; that they somehow exemplify a corrupted form of *Somaliness*. Purportedly, in the “deviant and treacherous West”, they have reversed the roles of the traditional Somali family (Hassan, 2017). Women have thus proved that they can be in charge, have (maybe) freely accessed pleasure, or who knows what. This is what my interviewees perceive themselves as being associated with, as soon as they do not strictly abide by the “traditional” role and rules the new interpreters claim the right to enforce.

For this reason, Somali diaspora women are continually exposed to the risk of being accused of “trampling on Tradition” while violating it, as El-Solh noted already in 1993 about Somali women in Britain (1993). Thus, they are continuously exposed to latent disapproval for being “untrue to their culture” (El-Solh 1993). This type of condemnation can come from their husband, the men in their community, but also from peer women: (self-claimed) most observant persons and self-appointed “watchdogs” in the society, as many women among my interviewees recursively remark.

In which ways can Somali women deviate from Tradition? By making sense of my interviewees' accounts, I propose the following systematization. Women can deviate from Tradition: (1) in the public political and social sphere, more particularly; (2) in terms of appearance and dress code but also, broadly speaking, as; (3) general behaviour, especially when showing independence and liberty. Moreover, they can do so in their (4) private and intimate sphere. In general, they can contravene this form of social control by breaching the social norms and expectations that the (male) tradition has imposed on them. In the following paragraphs I delve further into each of the above mentioned spheres (1–4), the thresholds the Somali diaspora women, from an Italoophone perspective, should refrain from trespassing.

The *political* public sphere (1) reflects the institutional life of the country (more below). The *social* public sphere is appreciated instead as social conduct and public behaviour. When deviating from Tradition, such conduct is often labelled as “feminist”, as the Italoophone Somali diaspora women spontaneously refer to it. My female interviewees often mention that feminism, or the claim of equal rights between men and women, is a taboo in itself. They often recall the 1970s and 1980s, the time of Siad Barre, when for women in the cultural elite the situation was very different. Now, they argue, things have changed profoundly, with a new dominant culture and general mentality that imposes changed limits of appropriateness. If feminism was even back then a controversial issue, today it is altogether taboo. Sagal, a permanent diaspora member based in the United Kingdom brings this to the fore in stating:

I can't go to Somalia and talk about feminism, or of gay and lesbian marriages: these are not accepted. I can't go and talk about these things, it is offensive for the culture. Nor [can I speak] about sex before marriage. I can't bring condoms; these are not even available. There could be some gays and lesbians, but they cannot come out because the masses do not accept them (5:52).

However, other female representatives within my sample maintain that there is a way out of this impasse. The introduction of *Western-style feminism* in an Islamic society, such as the Somali one—strongly affected by the weight of Tradition—is impossible. However, they lay out a space for an *indigenous and Islamic form of feminism* that is more consistent with the native tradition.<sup>125</sup> As Ayaan puts it, “my western feminism will never apply in Somalia. The weight of tradition is too strong. Yet, there

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<sup>125</sup> On Islamic and Muslim secular feminism, see the extensive literature by Baffoun Alya, Ahmed Leila, Badran Margot Jameelah Maryam, Jeenah Na'eem, and Mulki Al-Sharmani among others.

is a form of Islamic feminism, which can be in harmony with the local circumstances [in Somalia], including the right to vote, to work, and things like that” (17:51). In other words, Somali women can advance the notion of a Muslim feminist tradition that is somehow more conversant and consistent with the idea of *Somaliness* as it currently stands.

As to the public political sphere, there are recent positive readings of the impact of civil war on Somali women and their participation into politics (Ingiriis and Hohne 2013). My interviewees claim that women’s political engagement remains circumscribed in the male-dominated society as a departure from tradition. On many occasions, I have even registered among my female interlocutors the idea that it would be misplaced and too rushed to expect the political institutions to reflect women’s political equality. The often debated women quota in the Somali parliament—which was set at 30% prior to the parliamentary elections held in Somalia between 2016 and beginning of 2017—left many women (let alone men) puzzled. Commenting on this provision, my interviewees often noted that in their opinion “it was a bit too much, too soon just to please the international community”. Among others, Cabdi, who at the time of the 2016–17 elections was playing a prominent institutional role in Mogadishu, stated:

The country will never follow suit [implement the quota]; they will never be able to find enough women. This is not a religious problem; it is a tribal [clanic] problem. It is the clan that does not want to promote women, the clan and its rhetoric of grandeur and arrogance (19: 26).

A Somali woman seems to have no choice—she is supposed to silently support her clan, and surrender to its almighty power. Faduma, now a resident in Italy, notes forcefully that if a woman raises her voice she might be asked by the “elders”, with their old and traditional mentality, “who is this woman who is not acting in the interests of her own clan?” (16:22). The clan—beyond any legal or political provision—is held, in fact, as the ultimate authority. Only the clan has the power to decide who is going to be elected and enter politics, as Ayaan comments sourly: “in the end they place there only the women that they want to, those who are better controlled and manipulated” (17:22).

Appearance and attire (2) are other indicators on which compliance with the Tradition is socially measured and assessed. Women can contravene the power of tradition – of the *competing* tradition – by adopting a dress code or a certain look that clashes with what is expected from them by the (new) hegemonic culture. Look and attires are regulated by a set of unwritten rules, whose compliance is immediately sanctionable because immediately visible. The traditional Somali dress and veil, the

*juntiino* and the *shaash*, and later the *diric*—which was worn in combination with the *gorgorad* and the once popular Somali shawl, the *garbasar*—are no longer a common sight, either in Somalia or in the diaspora (Aden 2017, Akou 2011).<sup>126</sup> Nowadays, addressing or just accessing a public audience while wearing the traditional Somali dress is a challenge in itself and a way to communicate a certain level of independence, self-reliance, and self-esteem. This is because the public dimension of Somali society is increasingly adherent to a certain (religious) tradition and orthodoxy. Ayaan describes the situation as follows: “You know how it is, if you do not cover your hair, and you show an overly westernized attire in public, you are criticized; you are told that you have abandoned the tradition” (17:162). Based on this, women increasingly opt for the *hijab* and the *jilbab*, if not the *niqab* and the *burqa*.<sup>127</sup> According to the Italoophone Somalis, they eschew trousers (which were once popular) and always go veiled. If they decide not to do so—if they show themselves uncovered—they might be considered as women of easy virtue. Ayaan notes what she thought of a Somali man she met in Italy one time: “You see, you saw me with the trousers, and you believed you could do whatever you wanted, but you were wrong, you calculated wrong” (17:134).

As already noted, there is a competition going on between contending readings of the Somali Tradition. Within this framework, women of the Italoophone Somali diaspora seem to unanimously side with tradition as it used to be understood, practiced, or just, discussed, reformed, and also questioned in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, at least among the leading socio-political classes. There are the veil (*shash*) and the colourful dress (*juntiino*) of the Somali tradition, and there are the veil (*hijab*) and the dress (*jilbab*, *burqa*) of the Arab-Islamic tradition. Many Italoophone Somali diaspora women lament that they are no longer in a position to uphold their reading of traditional Somali clothing because the people back home—and increasingly those in the diaspora—have almost completely adjusted to the new hegemonic culture. Nowadays this same culture also sets new standards of beauty. Quite un-traditionally in the eyes of my interviewees, there are women in Somalia who resort to creams for whitening their skin or who are willing to take pills, “which come all the way from China”, as Beydaan recalls (3:86), in order to fatten and please the dominant taste among the Somali men.

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<sup>126</sup> The *juntiino* is the traditional Somali form of dress. The *diric*, in vogue in the 80s, is a dress with a pronounced neckline, while the *gorgorad* is a petticoat.

<sup>127</sup> The *hijab* is the Islamic veil, which usually covers the head and chest. The *jilbab*, is the long and loose-fit coat or outer garment that covers the body and the head. The *niqab* garment covers the body and the face but not the eyes, while the *burqa* covers the body and the face, including the eyes with a cloth grille in the hood.

Women's self-determination, independence, social recognition, and manifest access to liberty (3) are other aspects of their social behaviour that can be at odds with the Somali Tradition, in one or more of its possible readings. A woman who holds up her family not only through constant domestic work, commitment, and services (which has always been the case), but also financially (Hassan 2017), represents for the most conservative a blow to the Somali tradition of patriarchy. In a western context, in the diaspora, and within certain communities more than others,<sup>128</sup> some Somali diaspora women enjoy or have enjoyed a certain level of economic and financial independence, if not of social recognition, independently from their men and husbands. This may have come from the level of education and professional achievements they managed to pursue and access, or a welfare state that freed them from the tutelage of their husbands and patriarchs, elders and donors. Quite often, Somali diaspora women in the West are the privileged and natural interlocutors of a system of citizen and welfare rights (social benefits linked to motherhood, children, unemployment, etc.) that is strange to the traditional and communal economy of the family, the group, and the clan in Somalia. Whatever the case may be and perhaps through this economic independence and self-determination, many Somali women of the diaspora could, and sometimes still can, assert their own role and merits within the family. As they recursively remark, they do so while questioning the uncomfortable and often unproductive presence of their men at home. In this way, they challenge the traditional role of the men, while putting forward a new image of the Somali woman.

All the above notwithstanding, any woman who has “abandoned the tradition”—as she might be accused—is considered as a sort of “threat” in current circumstances, which are characterised by rivalry between competing traditions. She is a “rotten apple” that could contaminate the others. If dress code and attire are elements immediately revealing of a certain stance, “self-determination”, as one of my interviewees puts it (17:127), can be even more challenging for that set of unwritten rules that goes under the name of tradition, broadly speaking. Those women who made it, who are now entrepreneurs, traders, social workers, such as it was more the case, reportedly, in the “good old days”, might represent a challenge to a patriarchally ruled world.

Because of the social and economic recognition they have gained, women can represent an example and a source of inspiration for other women, and those “left behind”. Ayaan, who is professionally well integrated, deliberately uses her appearance, personal freedom, self-determination,

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<sup>128</sup> The Somali communities in Italy, being quite dispersed and no longer so numerous, exercise a lower level of social control on members.

and independence of thought as ideals to be spread among fellow women in the diaspora and back home. She says:

If once they scorned or disproved of me, now they look at me almost with regret and admiration, since they are now enslaved by their husbands and have not pursued their own liberty and must start everything from scratch again. There are women with university degrees that have resumed working just now, as health care assistants for the elderly, for instance. This is a way [for them] to start again (17:120).

Ayaan is a *donna inserita*, as she puts it in Italian, “an integrated woman”, socially and economically, responsible for her own needs, not depending on anybody else. She claims to breach the *new* Somali tradition in which women are allowed only limited mobility, and cannot go out in public as often as they might like with a very circumscribed independent social existence. Society prefers women to remain generally within the family context, inside the “four walls of the house” as Ayaan puts it.

Her experience is not unique. There are other women like her among the Italoophone Somalis and most probably within the Somali diaspora at large. However, they still represent a minority: their level of self-determination does not seem representative of the majority of diaspora women. Ayaan recounts the situation of a friend whose life reflects this minority experience:

A friend told me: ‘You were right, Ayaan—I have renounced my independence as a woman. I did not study [and] I haven’t got a job for fear of going against the tradition, of losing my husband. But in the end I still lost. I lost my husband too—in the end he married another woman’ (17:69).

Against this backdrop, my interviewees often mention the average marriage age as a proxy for the level of emancipation and self-determination enjoyed by Somali women within the society. From the literature on the subject, we know that in 1978 girls married at 15 years, 16 years, and between 17 and 20 years in the agricultural, nomadic and urban contexts, respectively (Baasher et al., 1982). The average marriage age had risen to 21 years old in 1988 (Ahmed 1999). My interviewees claim that it has fallen again nowadays, at least in comparison with their own direct experience. In line with the new course described above, the new dominant reading of the tradition seems to allow for ever-younger Somali spouses. Ayaan comments on the practice of early marriages in this way:

[N]ow [early marriage] is again popular; these girls have no other option, they think that whatever they do they cannot change anything, if they study and if they work hard, they will

never access their independence, they will never have their own work. Hence, they decide to get married immediately, there is a lot of resignation, to get married works like a way out (17:192).

The Italoophone Somali women falling within my sample were raised in a completely different environment. In terms of women's emancipation on many accounts, the first years of Scientific Socialism represent a model, a point of reference. The political programme of the regime claimed to advocate for equal—or almost equal—rights between men and women. It encouraged the public and the social role of the woman by promoting women's participation in the new polity, in the life of the state, as the propaganda booklet *The Role of our Socialist Women: An active Role in Nation-Building* well summarizes (Ministry of Information and National Guidance 1974c). That programme managed indeed to promote women's role beyond domestic walls, and, notwithstanding all its shortcomings,<sup>129</sup> it is still remembered by most of my female interviewees as an unparalleled period in the Somali records.

The elitist epigones of that political climate, who happen to be part of my sample today, and to represent that cultural sub-group that I have labelled as the Italoophone Somali diaspora, have in fact a different understanding of women's potential, if not practical contribution to the *life* of a country. In line with what they remember and have experienced first-hand women's role should be an engaging one. They used to marry later, were tasked with public responsibilities, and often accessed education and studied longer, in some cases up to university level. They maintain that all this inevitably delayed marriages and motherhood, quite in sharp contrast with what is expected of women today.

Fourth, women's family life, private and intimate dimension (4) inevitably subsumes their sexual sphere. In this realm too, the representatives of the Italoophone Somali diaspora seem to experience various challenges, in the name of tradition. If Western feminism cannot be exported as such, women having experienced a western context are somehow perceived as having escaped or lessened the rules of tradition, a tradition that apparently wants them entirely subjugated to their men, also in their access to pleasure. The implications of this are far reaching both in their public and private life.

Pleasure in general, and the sexual sphere more in particular, with all the liberties associated to it, are constantly exposed to a sanctioning system. These liberties, or just the longing for them, seem

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<sup>129</sup> It must be pointed out, however, that that political programme remained essentially and predominantly elitist, besides showing limited outreach capacity beyond urban targets or audiences. Most of the “enlightened” policies of the Siad Barre regime, which were concentrated during the first years of his rule, remained confined to Mogadishu and the main urban centres all over Somalia, without actually penetrating the rural and the nomadic world.

to represent a taboo in the Somali society, an extremely difficult issue to accept, approach, and discuss “as long as you are a woman” at least. For this reason a woman that entertains this type of subjects represent a source of condemn and disqualification in itself. As already shown, in reason of their diasporic experience alone, Somali women need to beware of what they say and profess, or maintain as right or wrong in public. They are in fact received with little enthusiasm and trust by their interlocutors back home, being prejudicially perceived more than anybody as potentially deviant from the tradition, as a threat to it, as Hammond corroborates (2015: 61). When it comes to pleasure this is even more the case.

Sexual pleasure is, in fact, not a subject open for discussion. Some of my interviewees complain about their status as sexual objects not subjects. They lament the strong *machismo* of the Somali traditional culture. Uba gives a detailed account of her experiences in this vein:

Sex is a taboo. You cannot talk about it or they immediately call you ‘slut’—in Somali ‘*sharmuuta*’, whore. They use this term [against you] every time your behaviour contravenes what they thinks is right [...]. I spent more than 20 years abroad [and] maybe things have changed in the meantime, but once upon a time Somali men would pretend that their woman were virgins before marrying them. Moreover, based on this same culture, a woman cannot have or feel pleasure—she cannot say how she likes to make love, she cannot freely talk about sex. A woman enjoying sexual pleasure is considered shameful [...]. You cannot enjoy pleasure unless you are a whore, hence the infibulation [female genital mutilation] in this culture because the woman is not meant to feel any pleasure. She is not supposed to feel anything, look for anything—a woman enjoying sex is still a taboo. If I raise the topic of sex with my [female] friends, they immediately say ‘but what are you talking about?’—they start laughing [and] do not engage (24:46).

Women, in this view, are the key vehicle for cultural corruption and a potential source of impurity, within the Somali tradition, more so in Arab–Islamic orthodoxy. Cilmi remarks to this regard that “women [...] when they have their period, are considered to be impure, they cannot participate in prayer or in Ramadan” (14:100). In other words, women are a source of pleasure and impurity at the same time, as well as the enablers of and the main threat to patriarchal tradition. My female interviewees comment often that the social control over them in every aspect of their life has increased in recent times. The following comment of Cilmi is quite enlightening in this respect: “Everything that is allowed [in Somalia] is also controlled, and this is particularly true for women. A man is given some limited leeway in expressing his opinions—if he is seen as erring on the wrong side of a debate

or issue, some excuse will be made for his stepping out of bounds—but the same leeway is not extended to women” (14:102).

### *How Somali Women See Somali Men*

Italophone Somali women are aware of their proverbial role within the family and in the society, and for the transmission of the tradition (tales, myths and legends, collective memory, habits and customs).<sup>130</sup> In the private sphere, they also manage the family, carry out the domestic work, assist their husbands, and contribute to making ends meet. The general impression I have received from my female interviewees is that they do so silently, unrecognized, behind walls and veils.

When asked however, women will express a clear opinion about men. Uba makes a particularly strong judgement on the “typical” Somali man, which she generalizes somewhat to the society. She is married to a Christian—a *gaal*, or “unbeliever”. She faces a degree of ostracism for this reason. However, she prefers this situation to what she feels she would otherwise have to go through if she were married to a Somali man. She maintains that “the Somali man is a dictator: he does nothing around the house; his wife is the only one expected to lift her weight to keep things going. Some of them [Somali men] are very obtuse—the women’s job is just to wash and clean, while he makes all the decisions, and she is just expected to obey and keep quiet” (24:42). She continues: “Many women complain about this to me—[that] they have to look after four or five kids, take them to school [in the diaspora], while he stays in bed to sleep. Of course not all of them, but the majority [of men] are like this” (24:45). Ladan, a much younger resident in Italy, echoes Uba’s experience in her comments on life back in Somalia: “[W]omen do everything at home, they make all the food, look after the children, while the men lay about [and expect to be served tea in bed. They are [doing nothing else but] chewing Khat” (29:5). According to the Italophone Somali diasporans I have interviewed, this is how things work in many Somali families. Moreover, this is a matter of tradition rather than religion or clan. As Uba notes, this “is partially linked to our religion, but it is rather a cultural fact of the country” (24:52).

Feminism, social and political engagement, appearance and attire, self-determination and independence, pleasure and sexuality are the key terms structuring the condition of women in Somali society. From the perspective of my Italophone Somali diaspora interviewees, women seem

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<sup>130</sup> Interview with Kaha Mohamed Aden, 25–26 February 2016.

imprisoned in a condition of subalternity, constantly held under scrutiny by a male-dominated culture in which the Somali Tradition is increasingly valorised and emphasized.

### *Nobility and Pride*

Somalis usually look at themselves as a “noble people”, their “nobility” being a remnant of their background as nomads (Laitin 1977: 30, Lewis 2002, Ahad 2008). Purportedly, the majority of Somali clans and individuals innerly host this kind of feelings, although they rarely show them in these exact terms in public. Nobility seems to dominate their “inner world”—the realm of the assumptions that allow them to make sense of the world (and the people) around them, and from which a set of “unspoken” implications emerge. The result is a long list of expectations, social constructions, habits, and behaviours. Among these is a particular understanding of “work” —including the typical disregard for menial activities that is recursively mentioned in the literature—that has often surfaced during my conversations with the Italoophone Somalis representatives.

By virtue of their sense of “nobility”, in fact, apart from those belonging to the minority clans, Somalis generally were not supposed to work with their hands as either labourers or farmers. This is a tacit provision of their nomadic culture. Traditionally, the nomads pasture the lands, but they do not cultivate it, and they do not partake in other types of artisan work. Other clans—which are considered inferior—are supposed to take up this work. The Rahanwiin and Digil-Mirifle farm the land, while the minority clans transform and process other materials. They all show a more “proactive approach towards the surrounding environment” as one of my interviewees puts it.<sup>131</sup> Blacksmiths, shoemakers, mechanics (Tumaal), hunters (Midgan), fortune tellers (Yibir), and the like all belong to the great family of the Somali minorities, or Sab. The members of this family cannot claim the most well-reputed (and “noble”) Arab ancestry (Ahad 2008, Lewis 2008 and 2002, Laitin 1977).

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<sup>131</sup> Daahir maintains that the main difference between Somalia and Western countries is the approach towards the surrounding environment. He says: “The Italian and Somali traditions are two different things, two different ways of living and seeing. For sure, here in Italy there are many beautiful things—for example, the Italian dexterity. I am surrounded [in Italy] by an environment that man has learned to exploit. [But] we [Somalis] have lacked this dexterity, this ability to adapt in the field of work. The Somali who has a home and the opportunity to exploit the resources that are freely available in his environment does so, but if on the mountains there are quarries to dig he does not do that—he does not consider those to be resources. There is no proactive attitude towards the environment” (12:53). When discussing the burden of the adaptation process and the concept of *nuro* (grazing nourishment), Bulhan (2013a: 22–37) reaches the (opposite) conclusion.

Some of my interviewees claim that the scarce interest the average Somali shows in these manual activities—including handicraft skills and technical knowledge—produces today a sort of “lack of manual dexterity”. Cilmi describes this purported feature thus:

The Somalis, in order to compensate for their ineptitude at ‘doing’ things—such as manual work, developing technical skills or studying and acquiring knowledge—have developed a society divided into classes, which, they think, is based on nobility. A Somali, who cannot read or write, or repair a broken wardrobe door, is actually happy with this handicap, because he knows ‘how to be noble’ in coming from a powerful tribe. In fact, those considered inferior are the Tumul, those working the iron, the Kab Tole, those working the leather and shoemakers, the Fundi, the bricklayers, the Malaay Dabe, the fishermen, and so on (14:46).

Apart from hazardous anthropological explanations, the important element to isolate here is again this concept of “nobility”. My interviewees report that it pervades other salient social currents, including *Somaliness*, clan, and clannism. Despite many distinguished scholars having claimed the extremely egalitarian nature of the Somali culture (Lewis 1999, Laitin & Samantar 1987, Laitin 1977), this society remains in fact quite stratified and compartmentalized. There are different forms of social distinction.

At the beginning of this chapter, when discussing clannism and the superiority/inferiority complex, I also mentioned this idea of “nobility”. The two concepts, clan as lineage and as repository of “nobility” are interlinked ideologically. As Cilmi puts it “Everybody in Somalia has the pretence to be born into a very important family, they even attempt to trace it back to [the Prophet] Muhammed, so that they are also noble in their origins” (14:4). He continues:

It is for this reason that we rely on the nobler and less compromised Arab descent. The Arab cultural identity is more valued than our own; it uplifts us from our complex of inferiority. This is why it is so popular to be giving Arab names to our children; the entire Arab world is very keen on this.

Again, apart from providing for a vivid account of the competing cultural layers of the Somali identity, the passage is quite revealing of how genealogy and clan affiliation link to nobility, and in turn to social and self-recognition among the Somalis. In other words, there seem to be an ancestral need for acknowledgment in the Somali culture that must be at the back of these forms of the culture. In the section on clannism above, I discussed how educational degrees and cultural capital interplay with the

clan variable, providing for the main coordinates through which someone is placed or just held on the social ladder. By adopting a similar posture, on several occasions my interviewees have devoted a few words, unrequested, to make explicit their connection to someone important, within the government or the parliament, today or in the past. It was not just about social capital; it was also about the pride of being associated with such a “contact”, and the anxiety to satisfy the need for self-recognition. I cannot recall, for instance, how many times some of my interviewees claimed some direct or indirect connection with Siad Barre and his entourage. And while the Somali oral culture and the typical genealogy system lend themselves to exaggerated claims of purported connections, this does not mean that such claims are completely untrue or unfounded.

It is the recurring character of such claims, however, that is the key point of investigation—namely, the allusions of proximity to power, knowledge, and “nobility”, as a source of prestige and as a proof of “merit”. Of course, this is a universal human trait, which most probably can be observed in any culture. In the Somali context, however, this tendency seems to find itself in the extreme. It could be actually interpreted as a veiled or proximate superiority/inferiority complex. And it has many implications for the social and the cultural life of the Somalis—the conduct of war and the making of peace, the relationship with foreigners and other non-Somali cultures, and the promotion of tradition and *Somaliness*. As I have shown, this cultural trait might on the one hand foreground titles and degrees as a way of navigating the diaspora, while reinforcing the original “nobility” of the ancestors. At the same time, it could be a strategy meant to recruit social status in Somalia, while claiming proximity or belonging to the main sources of social recognition there. Cilmi touches upon this aspect and hints to this connection as follows:

When we went abroad with this mentality [of “tradition” and “nobility”], we realized that outside Somalia everything works the opposite way: you are appreciated for outcomes, for what you actually do or know. Hence the expedient of ‘I know everything but I do not show it’. We have replaced the pretentious name of the clan with the name of the titles and degrees that we have gained abroad, such as doctor, engineer, businessman. We are guilty of being ignorant but we do not want to be judged for this reason. Moreover, we don’t want to give up on our (now just imagined) nobility (14:47).

As said, the driving force behind the attention the Somalis pay to these variables seems to be their need for recognition, and ultimately, attached to it, the fear of being judged (as inferior). Cilmi’s observations above were made just in passing, but nevertheless point to a crucial theme running

through the present research.<sup>132</sup> Apparently, it is a trope, a recurring element of the Somali way of being that play a fundamental role in shaping and perpetuating the Somali culture as we know it today, or as it has become to be known. I will get back to this point more in depth in the next chapter, when discussing the impacts of all these forms of social control, and their implication for social change, in terms of visions and challenges.

Here it suffices to say that my interviewees often noted that the “nobility” of the Somalis and the associated affects of pride or self-regard could be potential obstacles to social change. By this, I do not mean to assert some simple cause-effect relationship between an ascribed “nobility” the potential pride emerging from that and social change or to explain the former in terms of the latter. Yet, these affects of pride and self-regard appear to be intertwined with the form of *Somaliness*—the quality and tradition of being a dignified Somali—expressed by my interlocutors, which they describe as a common trait of the Somali culture. Scholars with direct experience of this (e.g. Burton, Cerulli, Lewis, Laitin, Cassanelli among others) seem to agree on this point.

The Italoophone Somali diasporans I have interviewed certainly reiterate these affective points at length. Beydaan, a resident in Italy, comments:

Somalis are very proud. We might argue over who is entitled to a cup of coffee, or even a glass of water, but as soon as it is served to us we pass it to our neighbour, even though we do not know this person; it is automatic (3:19).

This is certainly a sign of generosity and sympathy, but also of endurance and strength, evoking the affects of pride that such qualities evince (Lewis 2008: 25). Absimil, a returnee to Mogadishu, uses the very term pride here in describing this, noting “there is a certain pride diffused in Somalia, the pride of feeling superior, and this is exactly what keeps us back” (6:41). In addition, this is what many connect to the Somali traditional culture, and how it is passed down generation after generation. Discussing the same issue, Absimil says

[T]he Somali traditional culture has to change [... especially] certain poems, which mostly deal with wars and revenge, with glorifying the heroes. I refer in particular to the typical nomadic

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<sup>132</sup> The same point arises in my interviews at different points. Examples include Cilmi’s recalling the story of a young Somali girl who offered several excuses not to jot down her name and number so she could be contacted, which he surmised was based on a fear her limited language skills might be judged (14:48); and Geddi’s visible (and unnecessary) discomfort at needing clarification about the precise meaning of the research questions of the present study (27:106).

poetry [and] the machismo of the Somali culture, of the strong man; this also needs to be overcome (6:7).

Bilal, perhaps thanks to his diasporic experience, seems to have gone through such a process of change, having mulled over and arguably internalized a new set of values. He claims to have downplayed and somehow overcome the purportedly typical Somali tangle among the affects of nobility and pride and the superiority–inferiority complex:

I have learned important values [...]; there is always someone above you, who knows more than you do, who is richer than you are. I have digested these rules. I have gone over all this in my own mind (7:58).

I will elaborate further on this and other quotations in Chapter 8 on the (Somali) diaspora as a vector of social change, and more in particular in the section on the elements of the social change capital.

## **Islams**

I concluded the previous section discussing the apparent superiority–inferiority complex and the importance it plays in traditional Somali thinking, and the general posture people take toward one another. I have already highlighted that this complex is also evident in the typical Somali attempt at establishing a direct connection with an Arab ancestor (Laitin 1977, Cassanelli 1982, Lewis 1999, Lewis 2002, Bulhan 2013a, Bulhan 2013b). This apparently ancestral need for a superior figure or character, who saves and redeems the average Somali, finds legitimacy in the power of the religious myth as well as in the grievances of the socio–political context.

With the outbreak of the civil war in 1991 in the aftermath of Siad Barre’s regime, a period of disorientation, internal conflict, and “loss of *Somaliness*”, as many put it, followed. It was within this framework that, prepared and mobilized during the previous years, the widespread of the Arab religious culture became substantial also in Somalia. Alternatively, it just acquired greater relative weight within Somali society. Cilmi describes the process as follows:

[Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism] have found a fertile breeding ground in Somalia ever since the fall of Siad Barre. Many Somalis replaced the Old Man [i.e. Siad Barre] with another God—now ‘God wills it’ is a common refrain and the society has changed. There has been huge

indoctrination; these people have ultimately nurtured Al-Shabaab and Takfir, their Sunnism is based on Wahhabism (14:14).

This type of reading is quite common among my interviewees. They look at this period in Somali history, spanning from 1991 (if not 1989 in some cases) until today, as a time of great loss, disorientation, and degeneration. This period is believed to have been an important fertile ground for the growth of those religious groups and movements that regarded religion as the only viable way out of desperation and state failure. Indeed, in the last 25 years Somalia has experienced the implantation or the further development of a wide spectrum of international and grassroots associations, whose main ambition is to provide the “disoriented” Somalis with new opportunities and possibilities (Elmi 2014, Le Sage & Menkhaus 2004, Saggiomo 2011).

The Arab world and its culture have provided one answer. They have addressed the void opened up by the failure of the previous Somali state (Elmi 2014). With the outbreak of the civil war, the foundations of the Somali social contract—and with it the notion of national citizenship (Elmi 2016)—were compromised. What had served as the Somali substantial constitution for some years, although timidly and shakily, vanished altogether (Leonard and Samantar 2013). Somalis were pulled back into a state of chaos and disorientation, within which religious aspirations and responses became more appealing, given the failure and the limit of the secular ones. If Arab ancestry played a role in the Somali culture from the period of Islamic penetration on, in the aftermath of the civil war the Arab culture became central to the realm of religion and well beyond it, challenging other more traditionally local forms. Elmi seems to render with insight a diffuse undercurrent among my interviewees:

Now there is an ongoing form of Arab colonialism [such that] someone who speaks Arabic is [seen as] superior to me. If I want to be like him, or just aspire at getting close to him, I have to learn the Arabic language. Once, we suffered the superiority of the white man; now [we suffer the same from] the Arab. Today, a Somali who speaks Arabic is worthy of the highest respect. This is actually a form of racism. Even if he [the Arabic-speaking Somali] drinks alcohol, eats pork, or goes to the disco every night, he is a step ahead [of others]. It is no surprise that [everyone claims] once we reach Paradise, we will all speak Arabic! This [mentality] is what is currently destroying us. There is an ongoing repudiation of the culture of the white man—today children are being given Arab names by their parents (14:103–105).

Some of my interviewees describe this “Arabic colonization” as an ongoing process of “brainwashing”. Guuleed maintains that “the ‘Arab elements’ are making the Somalis change their mentality” (10:10). Jamilah, a transitory diaspora member, frames the issue similarly: “the Arabs are making [the Somalis] change their mentality” (25:5). Something non-Somali is replacing *Somaliness* and the typical Somali ethos. Even the Somali intellectuals are caught up in the new (old) competition between these cultural worlds of reference, between a western model and an Arab one (Bulhan 2013a: 333). In the words of Cilmi:

[T]he Somali intellectual has only two options, from what I can see. [He or she can] either play the role of the intellectual western style, in suit and tie, and transparent glasses; or the role of the scholar of religious science, in perfect Arabian style, with long beard, the obligation to cut moustache and to wear a *kamis*. What others see is what matters, especially if you manage to impress the Arabs, who are considered superior (14:52).

The Somali cultural reverence for the Arab world as the cradle of a “superior” religious culture is a long-standing tradition. Since the end of the Second World War, Somalis have increasingly travelled in good numbers outside of the country—to the western world, the ex-Soviet bloc (including Russia and ex-Yugoslavia), and Arab destinations, Egypt and Libya above all. I am roughly talking about the period up to the outbreak of the Somali civil war in 1991, while bearing in mind exceptions and distinctions. After this period, things seem to have substantially changed. The preference accorded to the Arab culture, and the socio-cultural “remittances” stemming from it, became dominant. Somalis continued to travel to, for instance, Saudi Arabia and Sudan (Elmi 2014: 177), but also to come back and feel committed to disseminate a certain interpretation of the religious message that they had experienced in those Arab destinations. Cilmi maintains that:

There are those who studied in Egypt, including at the university of Al-Azhar; they were not indoctrinated because it was not in the interest of this country [at that time]. I am talking about the 1970s and 1980s. However, in the last decades many people have studied [instead] in Saudi Arabia. These people have come back and have felt obliged to divulge ‘the Word’ [of God] that they learned there. We could say that those who studied in Egypt did not allow themselves to be indoctrinated. Others had contacts with the Muslim Brotherhood, and have come back with the idea of working for the people. Then, in the 1990s, a new frontier was opened, with Sudan, which supports a new generation of graduates in Somalia. They do not know anything; they have no [practical] preparation whatsoever—neither cultural, nor

scientific, nor technological. Maybe they can read the Quran by heart, and they let it go to their head; they always move from the assumption that they know everything and that everyone else is ignorant. While here [in Italy] we always quote Socrates, ‘I know that I don’t know’, in our country we could say that the saying instead goes ‘I know that they don’t know, poor people!’ (14:136–138).

These forms of cultural (and religious) colonialism, or influence, have to be interpreted together with another process that has taken place concomitantly—namely, the advent of a dispersed Italo-phone Somali diaspora, in Europe and elsewhere, where most of the intelligentsia and the cultural elite of the country dissolved. As discussed at length, the Italo-phone Somali diaspora spans several generations, with some at the time of writing approaching 60 years of age (or older). As mentioned in Chapters 4 and 5, they are the product of a distinct colonial and neo-colonial experience, where the Italian cultural presence—at least in South–Central Somalia and Puntland—proved particularly dominant. Even during Siad Barre’s regime and despite the rhetoric of the propaganda machine, this cultural elite remained predominantly western oriented and secular, besides being Italo-phone. Over the years though, this secular tradition has lost terrain, and most of its self-styled *urbanized, educated*, and purportedly *ordinary* Islamic interpreters have joined the Somali diaspora abroad.

While abroad, these generations of Somalis became a “diaspora in the diaspora”. As they recount it, they have been eroded, and then marginalized, by the side effects of a process of cultural and religious expansionism that was simultaneously taking place in Somalia and that was driven primarily by the influence of Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism, and the radicalism that the Italo-phone Somalis often associate to it, trespassed across all borders. As an eyewitness to these developments, Cilmi claims that “all communities that I know are in the hands of these people [the radicals]—at least the most important ones, in London, Bristol, Sweden, Norway, Finland, [and] Canada” (14:67).

Within this framework, I have often registered the impression that the Italo-phone Somali diaspora behave as a silent minority kept hostage by an apparent orthodox majority. As a result, as I will discuss extensively in Chapter 9, they nostalgically engage with their home country. In their sometimes-veiled intentions, they promote an idea of state and of religion that corresponds to what they had experienced in the “good old days”. This type of experience has progressively shrunk, year after year, in scope and intensity.

## “Ordinary” versus “Radical” Islam

In the ongoing confrontation between *multiple Islams*<sup>133</sup>—the contending interpretations of the religion that characterize the Somali society—a core issue is the competition between different readings of the religious code, including contested interpretations of individual provisions. Alongside the clan and traditional codes, the most important battle concerning social change in Somalia is fought out over the country’s religious code. By religious code, I mean the Shari’ah—that “well-worn camel path to the watering place” that comprises Islamic law and its possible variants. These include the Quran and the Hadiths—the collection of sayings and deeds of the Prophet, which also includes the Sunna, the Sira, the Tafsir and the Tawil.<sup>134</sup> Among others, the Shari’ah foresees how to perform the prayers, how to pay the alms, how to observe the fast, how Muslims should dress, what can be eaten and even what greetings can be exchanged. Shari’ah also sets out the main principles for dealing with marriage, divorce and inheritance; it is less clear on commercial, penal and constitutional matters. Shari’ah provisions can be broken down into *haram* (what is forbidden) and *halal* (what is permissible) (Bausani 1999, Vercellin 1996).

Within this framework, the sanctioning regime—the penalties that are foreseen for breaking the laws—looms large. In case of personal infringements of the Islamic law, such as drinking alcohol or eating pork, repentance and a promise to rectify might suffice. However, if someone is charged with blasphemy<sup>135</sup> or apostasy<sup>136</sup> for questioning an Islamic precept or rule, Shari’ah’s penalties can escalate *in extremis* to chopping of limbs, beheading and stoning to death.

A key source of controversy in Islam stems from the different interpretations of the Shari’ah—as reflected in the various schools of Islamic jurisprudence—and the absence of common agreement on the role that Shari’ah should play in the administration of justice in a modern state. If, on the one

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<sup>133</sup> As already noted, in a way, this type of confrontation is also depicted by Abdhullahi (2016, 2017) when he talks about the “Categorisation of the Somali Conflict” between “Islamists” and “non-Islamists elites”. This will be discussed in more detail in the concluding Chapter 10.

<sup>134</sup> The Sunna is the body of Islamic social and legal customs based on the Prophet’s response to his revelations. The Sira are the biographies of the Prophet. The Tafsir and Tawil are Quranic commentaries and explanations.

<sup>135</sup> Blasphemy in Islam is any impious utterance or action concerning God, Muhammad or anything considered sacred in Islam.

<sup>136</sup> Apostasy is commonly understood as the conscious abandonment of Islam by a Muslim in word or through deed. It includes the act of converting to another religion or rejection of faith to be irreligious, by a person who was born in a Muslim family or who has previously accepted Islam. It includes within its scope not only the wilful renunciation of the Muslim faith or formal initiation in another but also denying, or merely questioning, any ‘fundamental tenet or creed’ of Islam.

hand, rules and interpretations have evolved over the centuries, on the other hand, the way the religious administration of justice fits into the traditional and the state one has also evolved (Vercellin 1996: 297–311), varying across states and sometimes within them, as is the case in Somalia. In most Muslim countries, modern law has been introduced for almost all matters, including criminal, legal, and administrative issues. The exception has been family law and religious issues, for which Shari’ah remains popular. However, with the *tajdid*—the Islamic awakening or revival of the 1970s (Abdullahi 2016)—debate about the extent to which Shari’ah should substitute or supersede civil laws has continued in many Muslim countries.

Somalia provisional constitution, adopted in 2012, mandates Islam as the state religion. Specifically, Art. 2 states:

- (1) Islam is the religion of the State.
- (2) No religion other than Islam can be propagated in the country.
- (3) No law can be enacted that does not comply with the general principles and objectives of Shari’ah.

In other words, Somalia is an Islamic state and while it does not apply Shari’ah directly, all law must comply with it.<sup>137</sup> For the administration of justice, the constitution foresees a national judicial authority and independent national civil courts separate from the informal Islamic judicial system. In practice, however, the formal judicial system in Somalia is quite weak and ineffective, leaving ample room for Shari’ah courts. These are quite widespread in South–Central Somalia, and in the regions under Al-Shabaab administration and control. More generally, the possibility to address a dispute through an Islamic judge or *qadi* is a viable option throughout Somalia. Thus, in Somalia today a civil, an Islamic, and a customary system for the administration of justice coexist, as has traditionally been the case, although in different degrees.

Within this context, as discussed in Chapter 5, most of my interviewees consider themselves orthodox Sunni Muslim, and, in line with the Somali tradition, as adherents of the Shafi’i rite or school of Islamic law. Their understanding of the Shari’ah, and of how it relates to other sources of justice traditional to the society, is inspired by a moderate and tolerant interpretation of Islam. This quote from one of my key interlocutors, Axado, well epitomize a widespread opinion among my interviewees:

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<sup>137</sup> Art. 4 stipulates that “After the Shari’ah, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Somalia is the supreme law of the country. It binds the government and guides policy initiatives and decisions in all sections of government.”

In Somalia, Sufism, with a strong implant of the traditional culture, has always been dominant. Not by chance, in case of dispute, we used to say, how do we want to solve it? According to law, tradition, or religion? [...]. Nowadays, instead, we have been colonized by an Islam that that is foreign to our culture and traditions. Never in my life did I see so many pre-pubescent little girls dressed in burqas as I do today. The traditional Somali woman used to go tending her cattle in traditional dress, with an open neckline, and one breast out to breastfeed her baby in her lap [...]. Over the years, instead, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and now also Turkey, have stuffed us with money, and contributed to the radicalization of our religious life, because they support the most radical groups. They expect something back, though. Yes, I can receive the money, and I can manage it, through the confessional schools, the Islamic universities, and so on, but only if I'm reliable, and I'm reliable only if I wear a long beard, and I make a habit of being seen praying five times a day [...]. Ironically, it is we in the diaspora that have remained the true bearers of Somali culture, which is disappearing [back home]. To be sure, this was not our ambition 50 years ago. We were raised in an almost laic country—a country of 'scientific socialism'—so, paradoxically, it is us in the diaspora that has kept this country, which almost does not exist anymore, alive; we are the ones who have maintained the Somali tradition.

The Italoophone Somali diaspora, as mentioned, maintains a distinct interpretation of Somali tradition as it relates to Islam, one at odds with the now-dominant approach. Specifically, they endorse a political and judicial system that is predominantly secular in nature or inspired by a moderate and tolerant version of Islam. A handful of them even contemplate the idea of a confessional state, as indicated in the current Somali constitution. Yet, interestingly enough, they all claim that safeguarding respect for difference and tolerance is paramount because this is the culture they were born into. In the words of Daahir, a devote Muslim now a resident in Italy:

This religion is a choice; I'm not obliged to oblige anybody [else]; in the same family you find one sister [who is] very religious and another sister that goes around dressed in the western way, but they are not in conflict. This is how it should be. You see, we were born into this kind of environment (12:29).

The statement above well summarizes a claimed common trait that my interviewees ascribe to themselves. As a generation born out of a completely different religious and institutional experience, they habitually apply a degree of tolerance and respect for positions and interpretations different from their own. As a corollary of this, they all repudiate, at least in principle, the use of violence. As tolerant,

moderate, and ‘ordinary’ Muslims in the sense laid out in Chapter 5, they want to distance themselves, with all due nuances, from the current dominant ‘radical’ interpretation of Islam in Somalia.

Against this backdrop, the distinction that the Italoophone Somali diaspora members make between *ordinary* and *radical* Islam is the heart of the matter in today’s debate. “Ordinary Muslims”, as I have put forward in Chapter 5—and as most of my interviewees define themselves—are usually in favour of the separation of religion and state and of Islamic and civil law. This separation is not always so strict and sharp. The borderline remains fuzzy, and shifts depending on the person and his or her background and social position. Yet, it is a distinction that many members of my sample make, and that is important for them to make, consciously or unconsciously. In the words of Gurey, now a resident in the United Kingdom, and whose stance can be considered quite representative of this sensibility: “Ordinary Muslims keep the religion separate from the state. In Puntland, ordinary Muslims [*Musulmani normali* he says in Italian] are the majority; in South–Central Somalia they are the silent majority” (8:36). He goes on to explain that “now there are these armed groups [who organize] around their ideal of an Islamic State” (8:33). Discussing the condition of women in Somalia, Jamilah notes that “they [radicals] have brainwashed women too; they do not know anything anymore [...]. We need to keep politics separated from religion. Somalia has always been a laic country in this sense” (25:4). Her views are echoed by Amiin, who is based in Italy but returns periodically to Somalia. A part of the younger generation in the diaspora, he has born witness to the blurring of lines between the political and the religious realm. He says:

The religious issues are tied to the political ones. The men of religion of yesteryear are no longer to be seen. They used to confine their discourse to religion; today religion means politics, and these people use religion as a way to take the upper hand over the Muslim society. Back when Sufism was the dominant approach, there was a strict separation between religious and political life (9:36).<sup>138</sup>

What those in the diaspora have to say maps closely onto the testimony of returnees, who being closer to the ground are arguably even keener observers. Bilal, a returnee living in Mogadishu, says

From a religious point of view, there is an ongoing feud between ordinary people [*normali* he says in Italian], those who work for the government, the business and the corporate sector,

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<sup>138</sup> Sufism used to be the dominant form of Sunnism in Somalia. Today Sufism is often at odds with the new interpretations of Islam that now dominate in the Somali arena. As mentioned, the key ones are Wahhabism, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Al-Shabaab.

and the fanatics, those who want to claim that God has given them the right to do anything they wish; it's a big conflict (7:26).

Who are the radicals? In terms of groups and affiliations, I have addressed this question in Chapter 5. From a more ideological point of view, Italoophone Somali diaspora members define the radicals as those who do not make this distinction between religion and politics, and favour the application of the Shari'ah in full, well beyond personal status issues (such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody). It is true, however, that the Italoophone Somali diaspora do not seem to acknowledge the varying degrees of scope of application that different groups and affiliations assert for the Shari'ah in Somalia, rather grouping them all under the rubric of “radical”

However, when talking about “them”—“the radicals”—my interviewees are visibly cautious about how much to reveal and which words to use. I could often sense their frustration at not feeling free to speak their minds. They would typically generalize by avoiding naming this or that group, instead speaking in categorical terms—“radical” versus “ordinary and just” interpretations of Islam. For Italoophone Somalis, the radicals have expropriated the right to define Islam authoritatively and in so doing have set themselves against an “ordinary and just” interpretation seen as more “traditional”. That includes a rejection of using violence for political ends. As laid out in detail in Chapter 5, Italoophone Somalis treat all the “newcomers”—from Al-Shabaab to the Muslim Brothers—as under this general banner of “radicals”. As Beydaan puts it “Islam is nothing of the sort [strict and violent]; it is neither the rigour of Saudi Arabia, nor the violence of Al-Shabaab” (3:17).

It is a big silent conflict, as pointed out above, which opposes a “traditional” group—in the sense put forward by Axado—against the purported majority, and a more radical armed minority. Nobody knows actually how large the opposing parts are, who belongs to what groups, what their real preferences are, and under what kind of circumstances adherence to one group is sacrificed to the reasons of another, in the ongoing shifting of affiliations. If this is typical of the clan system—whereby smaller clans look for protection from and make agreements with stronger ones (Lewis 1999)—it might also be a pattern replicated within the religious realm at the individual level.

### *The perspective of women*

Against this background, the integration of a gender perspective is of paramount importance, given the greater impact that this new religious course seems to have had on women. It is among the female representatives of my sample that I in fact registered the most heartfelt comments on their current

general status back home as well as in the diaspora. These comments have often disclosed otherwise concealed or just dissimulated grievances, which cause widespread sorrow and distress. Ayaan, an offspring of the old modernization project that was put in place under the Siad Barre's administration, observes: "Before the outbreak of the civil war and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, we Somali women enjoyed significant positive social changes, but today women's rights have regressed" (17:3). She goes on to note that

In Somalia, a portion of the population is very religious; this group becomes very scandalized as soon as anyone proposes to change [the place of religion in the society]. Today you cannot afford to say something against the Shari'ah [...]; all that is prohibited from the religion is banned [...]; if you do these things, you are out (17:50).

She continues:

In the last 25 years, religion has changed everything. The Somalis, as people, are quite traditionalist; they are attached to the tradition, but they are not very religious. Today, instead, a new religion has been born—strong and with radical tendencies (17:118).

Aaden, a male returnee based in Puntland, confirms this portrayal of the ongoing trend in Somalia, noting that:

There is a deterioration in train, which has been brought about by Al-Shabaab and Al-Itihaad; they have changed everything, including fact that [women] now have to go around completely covered, 'looking like Ninjas', as Nurreddin Farah puts it. This is alien to our tradition, and yet there are women who sit in the Federal Parliament (22:62).

Those women who live at the crossroads between tradition and modernity—who have adjusted through a kind of cultural compromise between co-habiting alternatives—seem increasingly uncomfortable in the current situation. They lead transnational lives and comply selectively with the different codes of conduct and social institutions. For this reason, they are exposed to harsh criticism and prejudice. Uba, a resident in the United Kingdom, explains this as follows: "[T]hey immediately label you as an infidel, but they are the ones who have changed the religion" (24:41). She continues: "Now they interpret religion their way, and they always complain about these *gaal* who [they claim] have ruined everything" (24:70). She is on the same page as Jamilah, a transitory diaspora member. A frequent visitor to Mogadishu, she reports that

They claim to be just Muslims and they tell me that I have changed too much, and that their women are good, and that at the time of Siad Barre we [Somali society] were not true Muslims, but now we have become good Muslims (25:87, 25:88).

Hani, a returnee to Mogadishu, makes this same point stating,

[W]e have seen who Al-Shabaab are, and all the sub-groups, that call themselves Al- Al- Al- [plus a name or attribute]. We are Muslim, we believe in God, and then these people arrive to bring a completely different message [...]. They question whether or not we are true Muslims (30:34, 30:36).

From all the comments reported above, the following main conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, we can note the recursive **use of the term “they” to cover any non-ordinary interpreter of Islam**. This is a point that I have discussed in the previous section as well as in Chapter 5. By “they”, the members of Italoophone Somali diaspora usually mean all non-traditional, in their eyes, interpretations of Islam. In other words, those interpretations that are not legitimized by their understanding and appreciation of the Tradition are subsumed by the term. This particular understanding of what is traditional, which is very dear to my group of interviewees, is deeply connected to their memories and their pre-diasporic experience of religion. Hence, the term “they” may refer to all new (old) interpreters, ranging from Al-Shabaab to the Muslim Brotherhood, and from Salafism to Wahhabism.

Secondly, within this framework, another recurring theme is the **attribution of responsibility to Arab countries**. Most of my interviewees mention Saudi Arabia, along with other Arab and non-Arab countries (Qatar, Sudan, UAE, Turkey), as the main agents behind this deep change in the cultural and religious mindset of the otherwise ordinary Somalis left behind. I have touched upon this on various occasions in the course of this chapter. Here, I just recall the comment by Cumar, a permanent diaspora member based in the United Kingdom, who says: “only recently has a form of radical Islam been introduced and developed in Somalia, the major responsibility lies with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and they want to introduce Wahhabism” (1:11). Of course, the proselytising of certain parts of the Muslim world towards others cannot be neglected or downplayed. What goes completely missing sometimes in these conversations is that, at the same time, these processes have implied the active engagement and deliberate choice of many Somalis themselves.

Finally, another element to point out here, which is also a corollary of the first two, is the **ongoing competition, if not clash, between true traditions**. Each form of social control discussed

in the course of this chapter seems to ultimately respond to the almighty Tradition, with the capital letter. Social institutions in Somalia are essentially driven by Tradition, and who has the power over it, to decide and establish what is in line with its provisions. Tradition shapes mentalities, and inspires decisions. In the name of Tradition, the limits of what is right and what is wrong are established. Tradition has ultimately the power to challenge any possible process of social change, be it in the realm of Clan, Islam, or Patriarchalism. As shown above, many Italo-phone Somali diaspora men and women are the bearers of memories, values, and norms that are questioned in the present Somalia. Traditions in fact have changed and emerged over the years, on the backdrop of socio-political events that have had a huge impact on the orientations of the Somalis, back home, as well as in the diaspora. Yet, the appeal to Tradition, as the sole legitimizing authority, has remained unchanged from all opposing parts.

### **The War on Thinking, and other (Gender) Liberties**

Today, Somalia is roiled by a wide variety of conflicts. Some of them pertain to the outer world, thus having a physical or tangible dimension. I refer in particular to the clashes between clans for control over resources, to the military confrontations that pit the federal military and AMISOM against Al-Shabaab, to the rivalries between the different federal states and administrations. Other types of conflict are less tangible instead, and for this reason also less mediatized, although not less relevant. They take place at the level of the “inner world”, in the realm of thoughts, beliefs and meaning-making. At this level, Tradition, as the “lived past”, and social change, as the aspired development, with all their mutual influences and reciprocal contaminations, attempt at a compromise. Basically, these second types of conflicts in the Somali context revolve around the main sources of social control I have identified and discussed through the chapter: the traditions, clannism, and Islam. All these institutions, can be subsumed under the category of Tradition with a capital “T” as the utmost legitimizing principle.

In this section, I focus particularly on the fight for prominence between different religious traditions (read: also interpretations of Islam) that compete in the Somali arena. Besides the various wars on terror, war on drugs, war on crime, and the like, for the Italo-phone Somali diaspora another kind of war rages in Somalia. Paraphrasing and interpreting their recurring comments, I would call it

a sort of *war on thinking*. In their accounts, the new religious culture that has flooded the Somali arena has seriously affected freedom of thought, the salience of individual judgement, and thus one's ability.

### *The War on Thinking*

Quite strikingly, most of my interviewees touch upon, directly or indirectly, this type of conflict. This confrontation opposes the 'ordinary Muslims' against 'the radicals'. As the Italoophone Somali diaspora members claim, the goal of this *war on thinking*, of which the new religious interpreters are the main agents, is to silence any dissident voice, any form of questioning. Unspecified radicals – "they", as I have shown - aim, in my interviewees' accounts, to thwart any form of debate, and to contravene individual stances distant from the dominant orthodoxy. They oppose alternative interpretation of the *religious code* or of *Shari'ah*. Purportedly, these new religious interpreters lift the believer from the burden of thinking and taking decisions based on her or his own discernment.

The words of Cilmi are quite revealing of what he claims to be a generalized condition for many Somalis. He maintains that the Somalis have always been accustomed to one form of tyranny or another. Now, as he puts it:

It is the turn of religion; we go to the mosque and the message that comes from the Imam is that you have to stop thinking with your own brain, because there is the Imam who can think for you [...]. So you cannot do anything that is not permitted by these people, the integralists. You have to annihilate yourself, to avoid having an opinion. It is the doctrine that is instructed by Saudi Arabia. The position 'according to me' does not exist—you must not have an opinion (14:35, 14:66).

Criticism is not permitted, in the same way as alternative ideas or interpretations are not permitted. Cilmi touches upon this aspect again:

Some time ago, there was a Somali from Canada who brought up the practice of sentencing apostates to death, maintaining that this provision does not exist in the Quran. A thorough analysis derived from this. In the end, he was condemned, now he is living under protection. You cannot even talk about certain things, because if you do, you are already [seen as being] against (14:64).

These are just examples and the intention is not to present a discussion of the main reasons of friction across different interpretations of Islam. The underlying pattern is worth mentioning though:

the overwhelming impact of the new, purportedly hegemonic, religious culture. Its contours are far from being well defined or monolithic, suggesting, again, the idea of individual interpretations that differ from person to person. Yet, this (religious) culture, whose core precepts and assumptions cannot be questioned, is commonly perceived by my interlocutors as one of the main obstacles to social change, if not the main ground itself for wishing to see it.

The Italoophone Somali diaspora members return repeatedly to the fact that, in Somalia today, there is no space for genuine debate, or open discussion, and stress the relation between inhibited social change and the constricted space for individual reasoning. “As the Quran says, to be able to use your own head is an activity that very few master quite well” comments Cilmi sarcastically (14:109).<sup>139</sup> That this is so underscores the point that dialogue and purposeful public reasoning, while not entirely absent, are seriously foreclosed.

Against this backdrop, my interlocutors seldom directly addressed religious issues in explicit terms. They have hinted at the issues, alluding to them in a way that allowed me to understand without exposing themselves too much. Rarely have they made names, or they have explicitly taken side with one part rather than another, unless they were well reassured they could do so in my presence. When asked to address more specific questions concerning one of the new religious interpreters they often equivocated or evaded the question by postponing it to a later, more appropriate time. I will delve into this in the next chapter.

### *Gendered Fear*

This sort of *war on thinking* affects women especially. Their gender is the mark of a role that a patriarchal society, such as the Somali, has codified on their behalf. Compared to the years of Scientific Socialism, a recurring reference among my interviewees, their expectations in life have been curtailed and their public behaviour strongly regulated. The opportunities they are given to express their own will and free choice appear heavily limited. More than men, they walk a very narrow path, the risk of trespassing into the exclusive domain of men, clan leaders, elders, Imams, or groups of peers being very high. They are constantly alarmed by the possibility of breaching laws, be they traditional customs and duties, *xeer*, or the Shari’ah.

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<sup>139</sup> I shall return to the role of the idea of rationality in social change in Chapter 9, where I detail the way that Italoophone Somalis have assumed a vanguard role in this domain in Somalia today.

I have introduced the gender perspective in my discussions above regarding the institutions of social control and do so here in relation to religion. What I have discussed as permitted or reproachable in the realm of tradition (or even clan) surfaces here again in the realm of Islam. This is to confirm how merely theoretical or intellectual certain distinctions might be, and how the ongoing dominant interpretation of Islam is becoming more and more all-embracing traditional, authoritative, and legitimate, as years go by.

Tradition, although conservative in nature and resisting change by its own virtue, more than any other social force is actually subjected to it, especially when it is appreciated as the lived past. Within this context Somali women are reportedly challenged by a growing (conservative) tradition (Hammond 2015: 60), while they are experiencing a very limited capacity to have a say. They are not allowed to have their own opinion, at least as long as they wish to express it as well. This is what most of my female interviewees claim. “As long as you keep silent, and do or act as they wish, there are no problems” Hodan remarks sourly (11:41). What they actually think in terms of feminisms, women rights, and lost or gained liberties is also de facto banned. Hodan for instance—who does not approve of the practice of arranged marriage—continues: “As long as Al-Shabaab are around you as a woman, you cannot talk. If I dared to say something about arranged marriage in public, they would kill me straight away” (11:35). Her views are echoed by Sagal, a resident in the United Kingdom, who, upon her return from a country visit, laments the spread of extremists:

You have to pay attention if you want to send a message different from their interpretation of Islam. For instance, feminism, or that women have to fight for their own rights, or that they have to dress as they wish, without the veil (5:38).

Italophone Somali diaspora women live in this permanent state of fear and self-restraint. They are not allowed to express their views in public, much less to act as they wish. Within this context, dress codes and clothing prescriptions issued by the new religious interpreters are extremely relevant. Moreover, they can be decisive, definitely discouraging any attempt at finding a compromise or adjusting to a new situation. In fact, some of my interviewees are not ready to live permanently in this kind of environment. Jamilah puts it in these terms:

To be frank with you, what makes me run away [from Somalia] is this approach towards religion. I don't want to say this in front of [another] Somali, but this is the reason [people flee]. If this problem didn't exist, I would choose to live there, but I cannot wear the *burqa*. I

have never worn it, as I feel hot temperatures acutely. I cannot accept that others can impose it [a way of dressing] on me, rather than it being something that I do just because I want to myself (25:96).

Ladan as well is unwilling to sacrifice those spaces of moderate liberty she can somehow still enjoy from her location in the diaspora. Now a resident in Italy she is not ready to go back and comply again, if not for the first time, with certain rules or forms of social control. “They are on the rise”, as she puts it, “the situation is worsening”, “fifteen years ago in my home town you could go around unveiled, now instead, even over here in the diaspora, you cannot go out without your soaks on”, and she continues:

You see, I am doing [over here in the diaspora, in Italy] everything that I should not be doing as a woman. I do not talk in a lower voice as the Muslim woman is supposed to do. I look men into their eyes, as a Muslim woman should not be doing. Sometimes I do not just walk slowly, I also run, and I hang around by myself, without the protection nor the company of any man, husband, or brother (29:42).

Certain women are extremely jealous of the level of freedom they used to enjoy in the good old days, or that they have managed to get access to over the years, during their diasporic experience. Sometimes, this little leeway is simply a side effect of their taking the decision to leave, and distance themselves from their original context. In any case, the transnational space in which these Somali women are plunged in may allow, at least intimately, for reflection and criticism. From a distance, away from the strict grip of the forms of social control they would otherwise be normally exposed to, the Italophone Somali diaspora women may find the time and the space to judge what is going on around them. This space includes the landing community in the diaspora though, which in turn can be receptacle of the same forms of social control they have for a moment suspended. I will discuss further the influence of these factors in Chapter 7.

### *The Corrupting Influence of “White” Culture*

The conflict going on at “inner world” level comprises the opposition the new religious interpreters make to the “evils” and the corruptive practices stemming from the western world. It is a conflict that reportedly opposes a purist version of Islam, and its dominant *religious code*, and the “white man”, the western tradition, the *gaal*, and anything else held out as a potential source of degeneracy of Islamic

society. As Cilmi puts it: “There is an ongoing massive rejection of the white culture, while Arab names are preferred for new-borns nowadays” (14:105). Along similar lines, he notes:

The other day I was watching Somali national television, and there was an Imam interpreting the Quran. He was talking about the practice of chopping the hand [as a punishment]: ‘It’s pointless’, the Imam said ‘that the westerners criticize us; you shouldn’t be listening to them [as] this thing [the punishment] comes from God; it’s the true law, far from the beautiful rules that the westerners have devised for themselves; whomsoever says no to these rules contravenes the religion’ (14:74).

Certain religious interpreters perceive western culture, and most probably the human rights culture that is often attached to it, as competing and as threatening to what is essentially local and Islamic. It is a confrontation that can escalate to include any sign or mark of the western world. Geddi, a returnee from Benaadir, captures this idea as follows:

In Mogadishu, there are no real public libraries; all the libraries are kept by the respective universities. These libraries are reserved for those students who can pay the extremely expensive monthly fees... this one I’m talking about instead [the real public library] is supposed to be public and free. But it may happen that some terrorist provocateurs might use the excuse of the defence of religion to claim that such a library is a potential vehicle for the diffusion of the western culture (27:43).

The West has embraced practices and beliefs that are deviant from a certain tradition. In some cases, it has become synonym of decadence, of corruption of Somali habits and is thus seen as a disruptive force influencing the Somali social fabric. This portrait I have painted of the “treacherous West” is almost a caricature but is genuinely said to corrode not only the spirit but also the health of the people. Various “diseases” coming from the western world could, it is said, “devour” *Somaliness*. Ladan recounts what she was told while designing a training on sexually transmitted diseases (29:33), in the diaspora “but your mentality has become European then? These diseases come from the *gaal*; there is no need for us to make this type of training!” Along the same lines, she adds anecdotally (29:34):

I remember a neighbour, who was married to a young and very beautiful boy, because she had plenty of money. After some time they both died from a disease. Everybody supposed that it was a disease from the *gaal*. If I have just one husband and I go to bed only with him

[and] if I stick to the religious precepts, and my husband only makes love with his own wives, there is no way the disease can be transmitted. These diseases are God's curse.

In line with any monotheistic tradition, most of these “evils” revolve around sex and sexuality. Within Islam too, as I have shown, these subjects seem to be, by far, the most prone to phenomena of radicalization and violent sanctioning. Sexual orientation and liberties are subjected to harsh judgement and other strict forms of social control. I have already touched upon gender liberties, feminism, “free” sexual pleasure, and women abandoning the tradition. Other sexual orientations or practices that do not belong to or conform with the “true” tradition are also banned or sanctioned by the new (old) religious code in force. Contraceptives are one example,<sup>140</sup> as is homosexuality, which is presented as “a plague”. The tolerance of a bygone era seems to have completely vanished from Somali society, and is a scarce commodity in the diaspora (Hunt et al. 2018). My interlocutors report that there is today no room in Somalia for these “threats”, just as there is no longer room for non-Muslims to live freely. As Guuleed puts it:

There are many problems knocking on Somalia's door. Those stemming from the contacts with Europe, such as the Somalis who have become Christian, Jehovah's Witnesses, lesbians, homosexuals—all these people will arrive in Somalia. There are children of Somali Italians who claim to be Christian; how can it be possible in Somalia with Al-Shabaab around? These are the problems that we will have to face. Christians and homosexuals are arriving (10:78).

Within this general climate of prejudice, fear, and censorship, the study of the role of the Italoophone Somali diaspora, in general as well as for social change, acquires even more relevance. Their background and collocation in diasporic space means they are at the crossroads of cultures and traditions. The implications of this for social change and for communication for social change are far reaching, as I will discuss in Chapters 8 and 9.

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<sup>140</sup> As is still the case for some Christians, contraceptives are for many Muslims viewed as a “licence” for “immoral pleasure” for women by “allowing” them to have sex without “consequences” (i.e. for pleasure). For this reason, in Somalia—an Islamic, but more importantly, a patriarchal society—contraceptives are proscribed, since pleasure is essentially a male business.

## Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have briefly touched upon the institutions of social control that the Italoophone Somali diaspora members consider relevant in Somalia today for the purposes of social change. As discussed, social change is conceived as the lessening in the pervasiveness of the social control associated to the three main social institutions regulating the Somali society: clan, tradition, and Islam. I have discussed rules and normative codes that derive from these institutions and have highlighted how they overlap. Given the interpolation of these norms and prescriptions in and across the various institutions, I have proposed to look at them as the all-embracing code of Tradition—with a capital “T”. Against this background, I have discussed the ongoing contention between competing readings of what I am calling Somali Tradition and what is seen by my interlocutors as the true essence of Somali culture. This produces a confrontation between *multiple traditions*. More pointedly, the Italoophone Somali diaspora see themselves as bearers of a set of values and ideas that are confronted by an apparently dominant interpretation of Islam in Somali society today, one that is nevertheless of recent provenance (i.e. post-civil war). The diaspora see this challenger as posing the greatest threat to their values, more than any clan or traditional code in Somali society (although these codes are deemed a challenge at some level).

The points of friction between groups and interpreters are many. Drawing on the words of one of my interlocutors, Cilmi, I offer in this final paragraph a cautious summary of those frictions. I utilize his perspective in particular because his words offer an almost perfect summary of the various strands presented through this chapter. Of particular salience is his assertion that his much-desired (re)engagement with his home country is prevented or blocked by the new religious culture that has come, in his mind, to dominate Somali society. Here, the core concern is Wahhabism (as it is with many of my interviewees). As his comments suggest, there is a fundamental disconnect between the Italoophone Somali diaspora’s understandings of freedom and, indeed, of religion itself and those of the apparently dominant religious culture back home. Cilmi comments on a number of list-terms that he devises himself (14:97):

Liberty. Here is the main conflict. From the way you dress—*kamis*, short trousers, turban—up to the belief that Armstrong, once he landed on the moon, heard the call from the mosque, and up to the general control over the people.

Reason. Women, and their purported impurity when they have their period, that they cannot participate in the pray or the Ramadan. The use of the veil, or the fact that they cannot rule.

Economic development: this type of mentality clashes with the research and the economy, from the issue of the bank interests to the fact that you are supposed to have contacts with people different from you.

Technology: you can use it, but with prior permission.

Skills: they are not an issue, but everything has to be under control, you want to produce some fabrics? Good, no problem, but I will tell you how the clothes will have to look, how the final product will look.

Lingerie: it was imported from Dubai and India, and then people started to question their use, now only married women with their husbands can wear it. The bra in certain environments is forbidden, because it deceives men. Everything revolves around the dominion of the man over the woman. Men choose their women, they do not want to be cheated, they must know what type of breasts they have.

Science: it clashes, too many questions, too many thoughts.

Climi's reflections speak for themselves. While they are but one person's observations, they nevertheless capture something of the general culture and outlook of the Italoophone Somali diaspora, especially the ongoing contestation between *multiple traditions*. In the next chapter, I turn to examine the impacts of this confrontation in greater detail as we explore the mechanisms by which social control are 'enforced' in Somali society today.

## Chapter 7

### Mechanisms of Social Control: Sanctions and Fear

The last chapter outlined the three key institutions of social control in Somali today, expressed as codes of rules that bind and regulate social order: the clan code, the tradition code and the religious code. This chapter takes up the issue of the mechanisms—primarily sanctions and threats—that are the operative means by which those institutions seek to have their codes respected. The first section details the broken civic fabric after the civil war and the loss of mutual trust this entailed. The next offers an overview of the widespread fear of sanctions and the main forms these may take. Finally, the third section details the compliance strategies the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora claim to adopt in order to overcome fear and prevent the triggering of the sanctioning mechanism.

#### A Broken Civic Fabric

The tribal dimension is reflected in the sociality of the Somali, who cannot stay without another Somali, s/he tries to live in a group, in a community, to maintain relationships. To end up alone in a given context is the worst thing that can happen to a Somali, everybody runs away from this.

Interview with Beydaan (3:20)

The desire to avoid loneliness is a universal dimension of human nature. This trait is particularly visible in Somali culture, which may reflect the country's ancestral history as a pastoral society bound by high levels of group belonging (Bulhan 2013a). Within the Somali arena that I have described in chapter 4, at the presence of the different actors and of the various forms of social control, this idea of the sociality of the Somali acquires in fact absolute relevance. In addition, it does so while conflicting with a deep, pervasive state of fear that, according to the Italoophone Somali diaspora, immobilizes many of its members, if not the Somali society writ large, and hinders the state-building process. I am going to make this clear within this chapter.

The sociality of the Somalis is manifest in those social institutions and groupings that characterize their social and communal life. These institutions embody those forms of social control (clan,

tradition, and Islam) that I have discussed in the previous chapter. These institutions work not only as cyphers of mass (social) control, but also as forms of social protection, as buffer zones between the individual and the threatening experience of the world outside (Bulhan 2013a). This is especially salient, given the very weak Somali state, which is unable to guarantee that protection and has often been a key violator of citizens' security itself.

The civil war and the killings, lootings, and depredations that followed shattered whatever remained of a social contract that, for good or ill, had managed to keep the Somali people together after independence (Leonard and Samantar 2013). As laid out in detail in Chapter 4, members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora were active participants in a state-led project of modernization that built directly on that social contract. In the early years, during the so-called "period of the enthusiasm" (1969–75), their adherence to this project, be it spontaneous or induced from without, was hardly disputed. The generations of old-timers note the affects of pride and the responsibility associated with being enablers of that process. As I have shown, the shared experience of advanced schooling and higher education of the Italoophone Somali diaspora produced a social sensibility that competed with and sometimes superseded the old institutions (and the "new" traditional ones). This shared experience constituted a source of friendship and sociality in general, which proved conducive to new forms of social awareness and civic engagement, ultimately of socio-political participation.

The impact of the civil war on these forms of socialization has yet to be comprehensively understood. Just handful of attempts at systematic analysis of the "ruinous legacy", have been published in the last decade, including Kapteijns's *Clan Cleansing* (2013), Elmi's, *Understanding the Somalia Conflagration* (2010), and Haid's *Out of Mogadishu: A Memoir of the Civil War in 1991* (2016). Many members of my sample also lament the lack of any attempt of reconciliation between the combatants. After the war, several international conventions brought warlords, clan leaders, and politicians together, but these quickly descended into quarrels, with very little agreed, and the needs of ordinary people very much neglected (Aden Sheikh 2010: 232–66). Among the neglected grievances have been property restitution, ongoing enmities, and unaddressed trauma.

The effects of all these pending issues, however, cannot be gauged in isolation. They have to be appreciated in combination with another process occurring contemporaneously: the penetration of a new dominant interpretation of Islam into Somalia, which encompassed Wahhabism, the Somali Muslim Brotherhood, and Al-Islah, among others (Marchal and Sheikh 2015, Abdhullahi 2016). A long steady process spanning a few decades, this penetration accelerated after 1991, as I have

mentioned. The Italoophone Somali claim that the void and disorientation caused by the civil war on the one hand, and the spread of this new religious culture, on the other, are somehow correlated. Apart from the merely political or religious implications, both processes seem to have had a common impact on both diaspora members and the people left behind. This impact is reflected in the sociality of the Somali, and, from an Italoophone Somali perspective, it can be described as a generalized loss of mutual trust and confidence.

### *Loss of Mutual Trust and Confidence*

The civil war—followed in short order by the rise of the new interpretation of Islam—saw a definitive break in the trans-clan and secular social bonds that had been nurtured, however falteringly, by the pre-war civilian and military regimes. These were secular-civic bonds for the most part. Certainly, they did not draw directly on tradition, the clan system, or religion. Instead, they were a novel element in the Somali experience. Central to this “modern” socio-political awareness was an idea of citizenship.<sup>141</sup> Back then, the experiences of the Italoophone Somalis abroad contributed substantially as “inputs” in this concept. Gurey, this time in his capacity as a key interlocutor, notes that the rubric “the country belongs to us” was a common refrain. He goes on, recalling that: “We had rights and duties, we had claims”, and that “[after having being abroad] we saw that we could [make such claims]”. In other words, a new form of civic agency and sociality—centred on the newly consolidating state institutions—was gaining ground. This civic agency encompassed shared interests and visions, school and student life, associationism and advocacy groups, common professional and educational paths, social and political activism, political party life and militancy, and friendship in general.<sup>142</sup>

The impact of the civil war and the new religious course on these types of bonds is worthy of its own study. On the one hand, the Somalis—who had been making progress in overcoming clan disputes and separatism, especially in the urban centres—were now forced by the war to return,

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<sup>141</sup> On this point, See Elmi (2016) who reviews the notion and explore its main challenges in Somalia today.

<sup>142</sup> Within this framework, the experience of the “Orientation Centres” proves quite relevant (Petrucci 1972). They were set up by the “Public Relations Office of the Armed Forces” (Pestalozza 1973) also known as “Ufficio Politico delle Forze Armate” in Italian, and represented its operating arm. During the first years of the revolution, they were meant to provide for a forum to discuss local priorities and issues at the community and district level. At the same time, they hosted alphabetisation and health education classes, political orientation courses, and cultural initiatives. In essence, they were the genesis of the local branches of the future Somali Revolutionary Socialist Party (1976–1991) and of its Politburo at the central level.

sometimes very much grudgingly, to the shelter of clan belonging. At the same time, they were forced to witness, in the majority of cases without any capacity to intercede, the emergence of warlords, conspiratorial and conniving business people, and other entrepreneurs who sought to profit from the chaos. On the other hand, they observed over the years the advent of a new radical interpretation of Islam, whose extreme wings were outright at odds with their traditional or just ‘ordinary’ reading of Islam. The very nature of the new religious atmosphere, and of the militancy in the various groups or affiliations, coupled with the ‘secret’ strategy of the most extreme and armed wings (Al-Shabaab especially), together eclipsed the remnants of those forms of sociality different from the usual social institutions (Tradition, Islam, and Clan). The average Somali, who supposedly cannot stand by himself or herself—“only an educated person who has self-confidence can stand alone [...]” comments a diaspora member, quoted by Hoehne (2010: 30)—and who continuously seek the approval of the other, while longing for inclusion and acceptance, did not know anymore who to trust. Italoophone Somalis were no longer in a position to share their political and religious views, to discuss politics and civic participation openly. They refer repeatedly to this aspect with a perceptible sense of loss, of dispossession.

The loss of mutual trust and confidence is thus the greatest challenge facing present day Somalia. The hatred of the civil war, and the violence of the clan cleansing at the hands of their ‘neighbour’, must be hunting many Somalis to these very days. The new religious course, about which my interviewees are more outspoken, adds yet another layer of complexity, while it would be too simplistic to reduce the entire question to religious or security consideration. The combination of these two factors has damaged those civil social bonds in a way that is far from being truly appreciated. The “traditional” Somali ethos has suffered the greatest loss. There are no longer pure or noble principles to guide the conduct of the people, apart from the mere economic interest or the possibility to cash an immediate advantage, as my interviewees tend to describe the current situation.

Magan, an old diaspora member permanently based in the United Kingdom, speaks about a disoriented society. He is echoed by Amiin, a relatively younger transitory diaspora member, who is much more anxious about Al-Shabaab and its impact, but who is also concerned with the climate of fear that is diffused now also at family level. He says:

The situation has worsened for sure, in terms of both security and the mentality. When I left Somalia, the biggest problem was the warlords. At the time, there was the transitional government of Abdikhassim. Back then, Al-Shabaab was not an issue [as] they did not yet

exist. Back then, we could still talk; we could trust each other among relatives; the clan was strong [...]. In 2013, instead, the clan is now in a corner, and there is no trust even within the family; a young boy throws family members off his scent, and ten days later people find out that he has become an Al-Shabaab fighter. Now patrimony is an issue—money, business. The mentality has changed. Once within the family there was mutual trust, you could talk with the family members, with your cousins, with your relatives; now you can only talk to your father and mother, while the cousins are hard to trust if you do not know everything about them—what they have done before and what they are doing now (9:8, 9:9, 9:10).

### *Fear of the Unidentified Youth: Al-Shabaab*

This general loss of confidence and mutual trust is strictly correlated with fear of what I will call “the unidentified”. The Al-Shabaab—with their disguised and sometimes covert way of operating has been the principle source of increased general distress. During my interviews and conversations, they name is mentioned less frequently than it is actually alluded to. This attests to a level of fear that hugely affects people’s freedom and communication flows. Often, terms such as “extremists”, “those fighting the government”, or “radicals” are preferred to “Al-Shabaab”, which is very cautiously used, sometimes apologetically, as if the person had said the “unspeakable”.<sup>143</sup>

However, this fear is not exclusively determined by Al-Shabaab and similar groups, although for sure they are the key sources. This code of silence (of sorts) and generalized ambiguity is ingrained in a diffused sentiment of disapproval towards what Italoophone Somalis consider the new religious interpreters. The same judgement applies as well to the new ruling elite, blamed to degrade Somali dignity, which has been sacrificed on the altar of personal interest, gain, and greediness.

Thus, as indicated in Chapter 5, Al-Shabaab is at once an abstract “covering term” that is used to denote a wider “them”—the unspecified “radicals”—but is also a concrete reality that constitutes without doubt the primary (physical) security threat people confront. The fact that the group’s sanctioning power can ultimately result in the loss of life irremediably compromises, if not hinders altogether, any communication exchange, the expression of one’s true will and preferences, or political and religious stances. In addition, since it is virtually impossible to identify an Al-Shabaab member in everyday life, people live in a constant state of alert.

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<sup>143</sup> I borrow the word “unspeakable” from Lidwien Kapteijns (2013).

Sagal uses these words to describe the point: “For sure there are extremists everywhere, they are very well infiltrated, from the base, from the street, up to the ministry, and they are in every sector.” (5:37). Bilal, a returnee based in Mogadishu, laments the same situation: “Some of those who fight the government might have some agents in the public structures, and you do not know it!” (7:33). Gurey, a permanent diasporan, comments in this way:

Al-Shabaab’s strategy—hit and run—makes them even more difficult to identify and control. They hit for stupid reasons—because you attended a dance party, or while you are watching a football match. Hence, people are scared.<sup>144</sup> The point is that if there was a clear border it would be much easier, but they are blended into the community (8:40).

## Fear of Sanctions

Each one of the main sources of social control (tradition, clan, and Islam) relies on a specific code of rules, formal and less formal, which guide the behaviour of the Somali: the *traditional code*, the *clanic code*, and the *religious code*. These codes, like any other (formal) code, share one common feature: a sanctioning power. A threatened penalty applies to any violation of these rules. It is not the same sanctioning power exercised by the same authority or actor across the various codes, but they all do. Against the backdrop of the general state of fear discussed above, the remainder of this chapter is devoted to discussing this sanctioning power in further detail.

Sanctions differ across the various social institutions. Some of them are as old as the Somali traditional culture, some others are more recent and in the process of becoming a new tradition. Threats to personal security and safety are much more frightening than condemn and isolation, while elders or patriarchs’ advices work more as inescapable recommendations. In principle, types of sanctions can be tentatively grouped around one form of mass control rather than another. Yet, I prefer to address them in terms of potential impacts on their targets, rather than according to the power source they can be ascribed to. First, because making distinctions would be quite intricate, as detailed further below. Second, because it is a lot more important, for the purposes of this study, to focus on the implications for development communication and communication in general. I will start

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<sup>144</sup> A certain orthodox interpretation of Islam forbids listening to music, playing sports, smoking, along with other leisure activities more in general.

from addressing what I consider the least evident and yet the most pervasive of all fears: the fear of being judged, condemned, and then isolated.

### *Breaching Somali Codes*

Certainly, as a researcher I needed to develop rapport with my interviewees before I could observe for myself the role of fear of social sanction in regulating the speech and action of my interlocutors. The interview staged approach, which I described in the methodology chapter (Chapter 2), allowed me to build such a relationship of trust. This element—mutual trust—is precisely what has been attenuated in the civil war and its aftermath, as laid out above. Building trust in the context of this research, then, was even more necessary than with “normal” sociological research, as significant levels of confidence were needed before my Somali interviewees would open up about their fears and concerns. In this way, I came to realize the strength of the pervasive fear of breaching Somali codes.

However, it is worth briefly summarizing a few open questions about this fear. Firstly, we can ask about the extent of it in the Somali context, since fear of social sanction is a very common and widespread concern in every society. Every society has its forms of social control. Across societies, these forms differ—in strength, pervasiveness, and actual sanctioning power. Among the Somalis, the institutions of social control prove to be particularly strong though, and to be sensibly affecting the behaviour, the conduct, and communication (read: freedom of expression) of the people.

Secondly, being overlapping, competing, or coinciding codes and rules, it is very challenging to link a specific sanction with a specific incidence of non-compliance with a specific rule. In other words, it would be very hard, based on the information and the data at my disposal, but also given their nature, to establish clearly which code, rule or law triggers one sanction as against another. People can be “put in a corner” for all manner of “breaches”: their political views, the way they dress, or their expressed opinion on, say, arranged marriages. A “violation” could thus take the form of a religious dispute over the interpretation of the Quran, a side comment on a Facebook page addressing a supposedly compromised figure, expressing support for the rights of gay and lesbians, or the picture of an unveiled woman during a public gathering. Any of these might result in the same punishment.

Thirdly, normative codes are constantly updated, sometimes even manipulated, and are instrumental in political, religious or economic gain. What is right and wrong is decided and controlled by those in power, by the groups of actors in the Somali battlefield who have a say on the forms of social control that are meant for the masses (see Chapter 5). Many Somalis in fact lament the current

state of anarchy, and disorientation, the loss of the traditional (clan) ethics, and the hegemony of personal interest as the sole moral criteria. This links to a fourth element that I am not in a position to establish with certainty.

Judgements, condemnations, and threats of isolation have seemed to linger over the Somali mind since time immemorial. “You see, we Somalis, we fear what others say about us, we lack individual convictions, we live in the community” says Ayaan (17:173). This points to what my interviewees assert is one of the core traits in what they think of as the “Somali character”. However, if this fear seems to have always characterized the Somali society, it has also evolved and changed over the years. Today, in the current state of affairs, it seems more pervasive and frightening than ever, both in the diaspora and in Somalia.

This aspect is linked to a fifth element, that is the *communal dimension* of these mechanisms of mass control, and of the fear of being condemned and judged. Wherever the community is larger, stronger, and all embracing, the threat of condemnation and isolation proves stronger. People enjoy fewer occasions and narrower margins to lessen the permanent state of alert. The community dimension variable, however, has to be observed simultaneously with another individual variable—namely, the personal profile of the Somali. The level of dependence and attachment to the community, the level of engagement within the community, cultural and social capital (as a proxy of self-reliance, but not necessarily), economic capital and independence—all these aspects play a role. They have an impact on the importance attributed to the social institutions, perceived or just feared. It is bearing all these aspect and variables in mind that I offer following comments to the attention of the reader.

### *Judgement, Condemnation, and Isolation*

As mentioned, the main and most diffused fear among the Somalis is that they will be *judged, condemned, and isolated*. The following quotations reflect this fear, albeit in different ways, and reflect individual attempts at coming to terms with it. Sagal argues that it can be quite dangerous

to be sending a message different from *their* interpretation of Islam, even if they do not kill you [because as] often occurs in the South, they make a propaganda; they put you in a corner; they isolate you; you are discarded as a person that has not values; they make this type of propaganda (5:62).

It is the fear for this type of judgement that prevents people from actually taking sides, or expressing their true inner beliefs and convictions. Sometimes, as Hodan notes, the fear of being isolated can swamp even the fear of death: “If they take your life, your family, then you can defend yourself, but why do you have to judge me?” (11:57). The fear of incurring forms of negative branding, an indelible state of dishonour, a permanent state of culpability and blame, is perceived as unbearable. It arguably represents the inverse of the affects of pride and honour expressed by the Somalis. For these reasons, Hodan prefers to be ignored, to remain anonymous: “All the others, they do not know me; they cannot judge me” (11:46).

This fear of judgement consumes entire communities, at the local level, among the Somalis back home and in the diaspora. This is Ayaan’s perspective, who comments on the situation within the Somali community based in London. She claims to be depicting a generalized situation in saying: “The London community is very big, but people fear judgement; their conduct is fully hypocritical” (17:71). She continues: “You know, if you don’t cover your hair, if you look too westernized you are criticized; they tell you that you have abandoned the tradition” (17:163). Then she adds: “My sister was also commenting on the condition of women, but she cannot post it on Facebook, because otherwise she would be isolated, or at least put in a corner” (17:202).

These comments make it clear that there is a gender perspective to this type of fear. Women, for the reasons already discussed in Chapter 6, are more exposed to judgement than men. This is because of the scope of compliance that is required and expected from women in a patriarchal society. Their public behaviour and attire being immediately observable, they are at once exposed to this possible form of sanction.

Another consideration due here is the diffused reference my interviewees make to social media, and the importance it plays in everyday Somali life. Most of the members of the Somali diaspora and of those belonging to the intellectual or ruling elite are computer literate. They spend a lot of time commenting on social media, reading posts from leading on-line platforms or blogs, taking side on Facebook, and the like. The Italoophone Somalis report that sanction and reactions can be “very harsh” online as well. It is now seemingly a general trend in Somalia and beyond.

### *Fear of Being Killed or Suffering Serious Harm*

My interlocutors do not only fear being judged, isolated, or put in corner. Sanctions can cost a person his or her life. The members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora I interviewed would eventually drop

this fear into the conversation. Most of the time it is a fear associated with a specific religious group or affiliation. The fear stems mostly from concerns certain religious groups might make an attempt on one's life for a breach of the new (old) rules that are supposed to guide and inspire the behaviour of Somali Muslims. Fear of being killed is also more general, arguably reflecting an underlying sense that respect for human life has not yet been restored in Somalia. I gained this impression all through the discussions, albeit often furtively or implicitly from interviewees who were perhaps unwilling to express such a fear directly.

The level and type of threat depends as well on the social group of belonging. Those who want to live peacefully among the Somalis, be they back home or in the diaspora, and reduce troubles as much as possible, have to pay attention to what they say and do based on their level of exposure to the Somali social institutions. The level of control emanating from these institutions has to be appreciated in combination with people's social affiliation and status among the stakeholder groups in the Somali arena I discussed in Chapter 5. These, readers will recall, are the ruling elite, "the Masses", the new religious interpreters (including Al-Shabaab), and the Italo-Phone Somali sub-group of the diaspora. Minority and gender issues perspectives also fall within this framework of analysis. In other words, the life of a member of a minority group can be challenged by the dominant clan in the area depending on what s/he claim to be right or wrong and how loudly. Her or his competitors might challenge a member of the business elite, affiliated to a different religious group, and with different clan affiliations or agenda. Women outspokenly engaged with women's rights might be challenged by almost any form of social control and actor in the field (elders, self-appointed religious defenders, male representatives, etc.).

This is to say that the fear for retaliation and serious harm does not apply to all members in the same way. It is not always triggered by the same offence, and it is not always performed by the same executor. Within this context, (other's) life is not worth more than (the sanctioning agent's) personal gain, meaning of the vested interest. This is a recurring comment among the Somalis. "Beware of meddling with the interests" and the socio-political or cultural influence (read: power) of the various stakeholders in the Somali society—"it can cost you your life". The fact that life is constantly threatened, unless you do not adopt a certain defence strategy, has of course a huge impact on the quality and the quantity of the interactions that Somalis can possibly have among themselves and across diaspora locations. Communication for social change is inevitably severely affected.

Perspectives on this type of fear can be quite different, but as stated above, they result in the same *affect*. Take the example of Guuleed, who is understandably more concerned with Al-Shabaab and the radical interpreters: “What scares [me] the most, it is that we have stepped over the line, there are people who are not afraid of dying, these terrorists do not fear dying. This is what scares [me] the most” (10:120). Geddi, a returnee who belongs to a minority group, is instead more sensitive to clan issues, power relations, and disputes. As he puts it: “Now the situation is improving, but there are still too many weapons around, all \*\*\*\*\* have a firing weapon at home—they are cutthroats” (27:11).<sup>145</sup> Cabdi, a transitory diaspora member, and an ex-member of parliament, instead sees the economic aspects underpinning much violence, in particular that certain vested interests are “untouchable”. He says: “The strongest clans control the economy [and] you cannot challenge all this; it is like a *mafia*—if you even so much as dip your toe in their interests you are eliminated the same very day” (19:9).

Within this framework, women, as usual, are more exposed than men. They have to stick to the rule, for fear of retaliation, of being seriously harmed. “The Somali state is confessional” observes Ayaan, while claiming that there are not protection mechanisms for minorities, nor for women who decide to take a different stance on things:

Ours is a confessional state, as foreseen by our constitution. Islam is the religion of the state. If down the street you do not cover yourself or dare to make some statements, this type of government does not guarantee you[r safety...]. A woman runs serious risks; she cannot impose herself alone. Some girls, for instance, have been lynched and the government did nothing for them (17:49).

Finally, as a control test, I report here the perspective of a young Somali, Amiin, who has recently relocated to Italy, and who can be held as representative of the younger generations, those going often *on thariib* from Somalia as undocumented migrants smuggled to various destinations (Ali 2016). In his case as well, the fear of serious harm, of losing his own personal and physical integrity, lies at the core of his decision: “We run away because when you are young you are more scared you fear the carnal violence; you do not listen to any reason, nor any advice; you fear losing your own life, of not being capable of doing anything with your life” (9:1).

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<sup>145</sup> He mentions the name of a clan that I prefer not to quote.

## *Fear of Exposure*

The fear of being judged, condemned, or isolated—and the fear of serious harm and retaliation, even of being killed—underpin one overall, encompassing fear: that of *exposing oneself*. If I were to summarize the general state of fear that pervades the Somalis across affiliations, forms of social control, and location, I would cite this. For one reason or another, out of fear of being put in a corner or of being deprived of one's life, most Italoophone Somalis actually do not dare, in public, to question the status quo, to take sides, to express their point of view.

The general lack of trust and confidence that characterizes the Somali society today, coupled with the pervading fear of “the unidentified”, means that everybody adopts a very low profile. This happens to the extent that it does not allow for speaking up, for expressing one's true views, because people never know who they are dealing with or what kind of retaliation might await them around the next corner. A possible enemy, an informer, a traitor—“they” are all “well infiltrated”, overhearing you, watching your behaviour, constantly judging your level of compliance with what is expected from you.<sup>146</sup>

In general, fear can mean many and one reason of concern at the same time, the same one for everybody. However, perspectives on fear can be quite different, of course. They include the religious point of view, the political and the intellectual one for instance. People's specific social or individual profile, by virtue of its originality, can inadvertently expose them. The Italoophone Somalis are very careful to give no grounds for sanctions to old or just improvised faith orthodox, fanatics, political and economic potentates, patriarchal authorities, and similar.

The intellectuals, including the religious wisemen, find themselves in difficult circumstances. Once they were used to disputes, arguments, and discussion, now they are left with very little margin for personal opinions and views. As Cilmi puts it

The man of study, the intellectual, the academic is in great difficulty; he has to maintain a low profile if he wants to get by without problems because he is already branded by the community with the accusation ‘who knows if you are a real Muslim?’ If he leads a mediation process then they immediately have the proof [he is not a real Muslim]” (14:80).

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<sup>146</sup> This fear has affected in turn this research project of course. I have partially discussed these aspects in the methodological chapter, to which I make reference for any further detail.

He continues: “Then you enter this climate of terror; you are afraid to commit a mistake; you are afraid of calling the spell of God upon you. Standing against these people can be very dangerous; it can cost your life” (14:63).

My interviewees report that even in conditions were gross economic and political violations in Somalia, the silence can be deafening. As Cabdi remarks “I take your house and nobody can say anything; this is what happens in Somalia; there is no justice” (19:22). He continues: “You see, the politicians, it is better they remain in their *albergos*, that they remain silent or just talk with those of the same group. It is so since in Somalia the dictatorship never finished; we still live with that mentality” (19:23).

In conclusion, I report the point of view of Jamilah. Back from her usual trip to Mogadishu, she comments: “If there was a government, a law, I would do everything possible to bring about change, and I’m sure that many women like me would dare to come out” (25:100). She finishes her point by saying: “But there is this great *burqa*, which is like a great darkness, although inside there is a beautiful woman”.

Somalia has great potential in the eyes of many Somalis. This potential, so vaguely wished for, is maybe conversant with the myth of the *she-camel*,<sup>147</sup> the foundation symbol of the Somali nation. In modern political terms, this could translate in a sort of (morally) beautiful, virtuous, and attractive socio–political entity of divine origin. Yet, this potential is held hostage by the great *burqa*, this great darkness that engulfs the true Somali spirit and keeps it “veiled”, preventing it from expressing its true nature.

## Compliance Strategies

Within this framework, the members of the Somali diaspora and its returnees have literally developed a set of counter-strategies. These strategies allow them to cope with the pervasive forms of social control and the fears deriving from them—namely, judgement, condemnation, and isolation on the one hand, and fear of being killed or suffering serious harm, on the other, all collecting in a fear of exposure in general. The main strategies adopted by the Italoophone Somali diaspora are thus meant

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<sup>147</sup> The she-camel—*maandeeq* in Somali—is a very important notion for the nomadic-pastoralist, given the animal’s vital role for the sustenance of the nomadic life as a source of food (camel’s milk), especially when other sources are scarce. See Bulhan (2013a), Aden (2014), and Lewis (1999). In modern times, the notion has also been metaphorically associated with the nation-state.

to *minimize any possible exposure*. The overall strategic approach—which can be labelled *avoidance*—includes conformism, self-censorship and taboos.

### *Conformism and Compliance*

Cilmi speaks of conformism and compliance as follows:

We adopt an average attitude that shall not offend the sensibility of anybody, in one way or another we adjust to the circumstances, so not to exit the group, not to be marginalized [...]  
You have to adjust if you want to have something to do with the Somali population, with the people (14:112).

Adherence to the new dominant interpretation of the Quran and of Islam seems the main source of (religious) compliance and conformism so widely pervading the Somali society. “Take music for instance”, says Cilmi, “they are tightening [access to] it. Hence, people avoid it, because they fear the sentence. The Taliban forbid sports, too, and now they are starting to prohibit it here. Smoking? No, you cannot smoke” (14:85). He adds, “If you go to Somalia you have to hide yourself, hide yourself behind the faith, behind affinity to the group” (14:147). He is echoed by Ayaan, who maintains:

Today you cannot afford to say or do anything against the Shari’ah, you cannot drink in public for instance. So people drink secretly, or buy alcohol secretly. Nothing that is prohibited by the religion can be done, and you cannot adhere to another religion for instance. If you do any of these things, you are out! (17:138)

Jamilah concurs:

You have to respect them [the new rules]; freedom is absent; everybody lives in a way that others cannot judge nor condemn their conduct for being too modern, for being contrary to religion [...]. You have to pay attention; someone you may consider a friend will turn out not to be (25:41).

To these diasporans, a sincere or just cosmetic compliance with the religious precepts is the *conditio sine qua non* for leading your life without too many troubles. They report that this is more so if you want to pursue your own agenda and interest. As I have shown in the previous chapters, self (economic) interest is perceived as the main corruptive force that corrodes the true *Somaliness*, and explains most of the actions actually undertaken on the ground (read battlefield) by the various

stakeholders. If you want to promote your businesses, you have first to prove to the world outside (the outer world) that you deserve it, that you stick to the rules and that you behave. Axado made this point in her comment (p. 165). Ladan as well, who is a relatively diaspora newcomer from Somaliland, expresses all this with extreme precision:

The people who possess things in Somaliland are all devoutly religious. If you have money, if you run some businesses, this means that you are devout. And those who are not are isolated, marginalized; people do not trust them, because they are not God-fearing human beings. If you wear a long beard, and pray five times a day, then you are credible, and they might offer you a job. But if you are not a practicing Muslim, you might steal, or cheat, because you do not fear God, hence people cannot trust you [...]. Here in the western world if you steal you are sanctioned to jail, there are laws, in Somalia there are no rules, and what is needed is the fear of God (29:44).

These forms of compliance seem to give access to a certain level of liberty, initiative, and economic freedom, at least for the male portion of the Somali population. The approval of God and peers works as a sort of *laissez-faire*, *laissez-passer*. People feel then licensed to go their way, and trespass against certain public rules.

For women, the situation is a lot more complicated though. They do not enjoy the same strength, economic or social liberty. Being in compliant to certain religious precepts and practices is immediately detectable for them. As I have pointed out on more than one occasion their attire and public behaviour is subject to a constant form of sanction. Uba says

Once we had our colourful dresses—for sure not this black [attire] that looms over us today. If I'm going to Somalia, I have to wear that long mantel, like the *capinere* [a derogatory term] as I call them (24:38).

Dressing up in a certain way helps the women to keep a low profile and not expose themselves. This is even more striking for Italophone Somali women who leave their base in the diaspora and go back home and vice versa, adopting often two completely different codes of conduct and aesthetics. The two models are not interchangeable and there is no communication across them. They correspond to two different profiles, to two phone numbers sometimes, one active on WhatsApp, another one on Viber, with two different pictures: one relevant for a certain set of contacts, the other one for another. As Jamilah confirms: “I dress up like them [local women], not to incur in any problem” (25:23).

Sometimes wearing the traditional attire can be a good compromise, but it is not always the case, less and less apparently. Caaisho is based in Mogadishu. Despite wearing the traditional clothing, she does not feel safe anymore. Tradition itself, as I have shown, has changed, and a certain tradition is no longer legitimate. She is exposed to the comments and the judgement of the people, even the very young ones. She feels at odds with the people left behind that are now her new neighbours, or her hosting community. In her words:

They don't say 'hi'; they don't respect you; there is a big difference in the mentality; even a child of 4–5 years old can insult you in the street, and why? Because they have heard their mothers and fathers, who can insult you if you are not dressed like them. They want you to wear a big dress that covers you from head to toe, with a long veil (26:45).

Many women feel the burden of isolation, of ignoring who can potentially be spying them, of not knowing anymore who can possibly share their same views. This is the biggest issue, the isolation behind a wall of fear. Fear for being banned or discredited by the group, fear for one's own safety and security, fear for life itself. A functioning state or security apparatus would help many women to engage maybe more, but it would not be enough. Isolation comes from the society, from those forms of aggregations and sociality that are particularly dear to the Somali. Isolation is a heavy burden to sustain, while it can seriously impede the free expression of one's views and social change.

### *Scope for Some Hope*

Among my interviewees, I have often registered a strong, eventually unconcealed, pleasure in finding out that other people (read: other interviewees) still hold to similar (old) views. It is an extremely encouraging finding, a way to look beyond that wall, or breach it for a while. As Hodan told me once, during our interview “If I find five people here and five people there who think like me, then my idea can progress, it suffices that I find other like-minded people. [Addressed to the interviewer] If you find another five women like me, please let me know” (11:58). Indeed, Somali society, some of my interviewees acknowledge, sometimes furtively, evinces a subterranean quest for liberty. Conformism and compliance are often just cosmetic. As Jamilah reports, after her frequent trips to Mogadishu

In reality, the younger generations—those who were born during the war—they are tired too; they want freedom [...]. People feel like being free. Under the *burqa*, they wear jeans or tight

pants. And not just that. People feel like working, studying, going somewhere, doing something (25:43, 25:46).

Italophone Somali diaspora compliance with the new rule works as a strategy instrumental to get a sort of safe-conduct to their country or community of origin, and as a certification of conventionality. It is a low profile behaviour adopted not to raise any cause for sanctions in the eyes of those socially in control. As discussed at length, among these sanctioning powers, a certain Islamic hegemonic view seems to play the lion share, and to be the cornerstone of all concerns.

## **Taboo Subjects and Behaviours**

Italophone Somali diaspora members seem to adopt similar strategies irrespective of their location be it in the diaspora, “back home”, or along those transnational paths they beat in their periodical trips to Somalia. Conformism and compliance apply to most of them, at least superficially, visibly manifest in their behaviour, in their body language and in the language of their clothes (dress language). In addition to this, *self-censorship* and *taboos* are the most recurring strategies that my interlocutors report adopting. I devote this section to these strategies, which in turn strongly influence Somalis’ communicative dimension as agents of change. Hence, their relevance for the research questions of this work.

Dealing with Development Communication and Communication for Social Change, as occurring at interpersonal level and across diaspora communities—as I have shown in the theoretical Chapter 2—implies as well to discuss how spontaneous this type of communication actually is. Self-censorship and compliance with taboo subjects appear here, elicited as they are by this communication perspective. Most of my interviewees somehow confess to resorting to these strategies, while keeping a low profile.

There are a set of topics that, based on the accounts of the Italophone Somali diaspora, cannot be discussed in public, sometimes not even mentioned. I have grouped these topics, to which I generally refer as taboo subjects, into three: *religious, political, and social taboos*. Similar to the forms of sanctions discussed before, the dividing lines between these three are rather more analytical than real. The various taboos conflate in fact a general state of omertà and self-censorship where original background and specific connotations overlap with each other.

The connection between a first set of taboos and *religion* is clearer than for others. My interviewees claim that they generally reflect, or are a consequence of, the current (seemingly) dominant Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. Based on descending religious tenets people cannot question the authority of the Quran for instance, nor of the Shari’ah, nor the precepts of its currently dominant interpretation. In other words, the “ordinary believer” cannot discuss either religion, as such, or its merits. Those who do so might incur a strong reaction from the sanctioning powers. “There is no freedom of religious expression” (8:32), states Gurey, and people do not dare to discuss the Muslim prohibition against “eating pork or drink alcohol” (8:35) for instance, as he puts it. “Religion is not a topic that is open for discussion”, echoes Ayaan (17:201). Jamilah confirms this, saying “if you touch upon a certain issue, you immediately put yourself in trouble” (25:24). As a result, Somalis—back home more so than in the diaspora—never “talk about religion, because it is something that scares [them]” (Hani 30:12).

A second set of taboo subjects pertain to *dress and habits*. Of course, these reflect a certain dominant religious mindset, but I use their strong social connotation as a criterion to distinguish them under this broad social category. I look at them from a social point of view, given their close association with the forms of the Somali sociality. By this, I mean that while these social taboos sanction behaviour, they always imply the participation or the presence of *at least one other person*.<sup>148</sup> The salient dress- and habit-related social taboos here are almost all related to sexuality. Specifically, the taboos in question refer to sexual orientation and practices that “are not accepted by the masses” and are considered “offensive to the Somali culture” (5:52), such as being gay, lesbian (including same-sex marriage), as I have shown when discussing the “corrupting white culture” in Chapter 6. This set of taboos includes the use of condoms, for instance, or more generally discussing feminism and acknowledging women’s sexual pleasure, as laid out in the section on traditional and unconventional women in Chapter 6. “You cannot talk about [sex], or they immediately label you a whore”, “a woman that enjoys sex is a taboo” states Uba (24:46). As a corollary, questioning, in a patriarchal society, the practice of early and combined marriages, is also a no-go subject (11.35) that can cost up to your life.

Among these taboo behaviours, I have also included the tendency to appear too westernized or too amenable towards the corrupted and corrupting western world, its customs and supposedly

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<sup>148</sup> The religious taboos discussed above are grouped together instead while looking at the compliance of the isolated individual.

degenerate values. A good proxy for this is the contacts and the type of relationships that people have with the white man. As Hodan puts it:

We Somalis, we are open people. We like to communicate, talk, listen [...]. Now we cannot have friends from other countries. As long as Al-Shabaab is around, we cannot have friends from those countries, because they immediately ask: 'Who is this?' There are Somalis who have Italian, American, French, Arab friends, but cannot be open about this (11:40).

Her comments are echoed by those of Ladan, who is accused of having indulged too much and too long with Italian friends and companies, and who has been told by an older Somali woman, as a warning: "You will die alone as you are now among the whites!" (29:39). She explains this by saying: "To live with the white man means to live alone; it means to distance oneself from the culture and the tradition".

A third group of taboos concerns *politics*. The presence of Al-Shabaab on the ground has completely altered matters, by adding new complications to the old clan politics. Most of my interviewees mention politics as an off limits area. Somalis eschew talking about it altogether. The main reason for this is the ever-present risk of being overheard by the "potentially present, but never seen" Al-Shabaab fighter or sympathizer. They cannot even afford to mention the government in order to criticize it, because this would imply that they recognize one. In the words of Hodan "you have to pay attention to what you say; you cannot even say that you would like to change the government, because they do not want a government at all, and of course you cannot say something against them" (11:74). Amiin frames the issue in more or less the same terms, saying, "There are things that you cannot mention in public, and one of these things is politics. [This is b]ecause, what you say reveals whether you support the government or Al-Shabaab" (9:35). Aaden, a returnee to Puntland, sees things in the same way: "In practice, where Al-Shabaab are in control, you are always in danger, you cannot comment on anything that they do; you cannot say or think what you want" (22:80).

However, the reluctance to discuss politics openly is not merely due to Al-Shabaab. It also reflects the problems in clan politics, which were only worsened by the years of civil war. The idea of politics as an arena of open and plural discussion no longer seem to have any currency in Somali society, if it ever did. More than ever, people stay behind clan walls and communication across groups is seldom seen. As Axado noted during our telephone call, "[i]n the meantime, the majority of us, also in the diaspora, has become tribalized". The café, in the diaspora as well as in the home country, is a close

approximation of the Somali public sphere. The Italoophone Somali diaspora complain that it has been silenced. As Cabdi says, “For instance, if I talk badly about the President of the Republic in a café, I risk my life if in that café there are people from his clan” (19:24). Amiin complains about the same issue in the diaspora:

Also in the Diaspora, in the café [*al bar* in the original] we never talk about politics. You know that our politics is tied to the clan, but we usually skip the subject. If someone arrives and starts talking about politics, even if he says something sound, he is given the stink eye, and we immediately ask each other ‘where is this guy from?’ Then we realize that he comes from this or that region, and then we understand immediately, or we like to think we do, that he speaks for his clan’s interests. We haven’t reached the point of sharing political views, you are either \*\*\*\*\* or \*\*\*\*\* (9:12).

From within the country the situation is even worse. Anything can be suspicious in the eyes of those in power. Geddi, a returnee, faces more than one challenge in concealing his political views, while advocating for his minority group. He prefers, strategically, to neutralize the issue at stake and water it down as a rather technical one. Fearing sanction from those in power in Mogadishu, he tries to maintain a low profile. He is obsessed with the idea of becoming a target or having people after him. For instance, he does not want other people to know that he has been interviewed for this research. He prefers to use another word. In one of his emails he writes: “When people hear the word ‘interview’ they think it must by definition be about ‘politics’; they therefore find the idea of people doing ‘interviews’ as threatening to the continuity of their power” (27:98).

Politics in a *public space*, for the average person, as well as for the (ruling) elite is a taboo subject. Anybody politically engaged is exposed to the reactions, remonstrations, and sanctions of all those not sharing his or her same views. People usually do not dare to express themselves, unless they are among trusted friends and family members. However, things can change, slightly, when the space changes. The virtual space of social media is one example. Within this space, Somalis are often very active, engaged and talkative. Perhaps they can dare more, being physically distant, at least in principle and in the immediate present, from a potential moral offence or physical retaliation. But then again, this type of space does not represent actually real *fora* that is open for public discussion, but is rather a mobilizing tool in the hands of those affiliated with a certain political or religious stance. Uba reports, “If you dare to say something on Facebook they immediately offend you, they answer back, from everywhere, from within the diaspora as well as from Somalia” (24:40). In addition, she

continues, “What I notice on Facebook is that they quarrel among themselves, in the name of the clan. If you express an opinion about the head of the government, for instance, you have them immediately against you; you cannot express your own views” (24:56).

## Self-Censorship

Readers will no doubt have registered that self-censorship is perceived as quite prevalent from an Italoophone Somalis perspective. Self-censorship is somehow implied by all other fears and strategies discussed so far. It comes into play every time fear does, and of course, self-restraint is directly linked to taboos. Compared to compliance and conformism, self-censorship has a distinctive feature. The former serves to show public adherence to any of the *codes* discussed so far, including belonging to the group, the community, the group of peers. They imply a positive, active behaviour. Self-censorship is instead passive; it is a non-input in the world of facts and actions. It is a way to distance the self intimately and privately from the outer world, while preventing it from stepping over no-go areas. In other words, self-censorship and omertà are not visible. They are about omissions, deferments, and postponement maybe, to a remote time and space, eventually open for free discussion. This is something that seems more and scarcer in Somalia. On many occasions, I have registered the feeling of helplessness, limit, and resignation that is so diffused across generations among the Somalis. Comments in this vein include: “If you say something openly, and for this reason someone is keen on hurting you, and there is no security apparatus that can help you, how can a state work?” (9:64); or “From a security point of view, they take advantage of the absence of a rule of law, of fear, and of the fact that you do not have the right to talk. But if you are silent, what can you do?” (9:60). Once more, it is worth highlighting here the generic use of “they”. For sure, it is a way to be cautious, but also the mark of a fear that is pervasive—indefinite and without borders.

Within this scenario, most Italoophone Somalis opt for a very low profile, as discussed at length. They do not disclose what they really think, at least not in Somalia: “If I were in Somalia I would keep my opinions to myself, because the people would not accept them, or understand them” (24:36). A similar point is made in terms of intentions to go back: “You have to pay attention to what you say, I do not intend to go back, but those who want to go back, they have to pay attention, they are not free” (17:203). The same applies in the diaspora, for those communities that are more centralized and strong, as well as in the diaspora’s virtual spaces, such as Facebook and blogs.

## Concluding Remarks

Somalis, the Italoophone diaspora members claim, live in a general state of fear. Big chunks of their social and political life, over which they have completely lost control, are like frozen. “We live in a state of terror” as Hani, a returnee to Mogadishu, puts it (30:11), a state pervaded by the mutilation of the self. I detailed the different sources of power and control in the public sphere in Chapter 6. In this Chapter 7, I have delved into the main fears that shakes the Somali society, still from an Italoophone diaspora perspective, and that can be subsumed under one overall, encompassing fear: that of *exposing oneself*. Ultimately, most of these fears have some religious connotation. However, it would be too simplistic to reduce fear in Somalia today just to religion. Forms of social control and sanction encompass, as I have discussed in the previous chapters, tradition and clannism as well, in a competing and overlapping race that immobilizes the country and its society.

Against this backdrop, few generations of Somalis—especially among the Italoophone Somali diaspora but it may hold true well beyond them—are unpleasantly compelled to comply with the new rules of the game. To protect life and safety, they have to sacrifice their memories, inner beliefs, and background on the altar of a new dominant culture.

## Chapter 8

# The Diaspora as a Vector of Social Change

### Processes of Social Change

This chapter builds on the material laid out in the previous empirical ones (Chapters 4 to 7). To recap briefly, those chapters defined the socio-cultural sub-group within Somali society from which I draw my sample: the Italoophone Somali diaspora. I have also highlighted the pivotal role the Italian-sponsored education system (and the legacy of Italian cultural influence more generally) have played in the development of the outlook, values and life trajectories of this group. Secondly, I have detailed the Italoophone Somali diaspora's understanding of the impediments to social change in the current Somali arena, in particular the principal actors involved. In so doing, I have presented a picture of 'the key players' in discussions of contemporary social change in Somali. Thirdly, I have detailed the key institutions of social control that are, in turn, a product of the key stakeholders. Finally, I have explored the central mechanisms of social control that derive from those institutions—namely, threat of sanctions, and fear—and the reactions of the Italoophone Somali diaspora to them, understood here as the various “survival strategies” they employ to navigate and manage those mechanisms of control. Institutions and mechanisms thus constitute “what is at stake” in discussions of contemporary social change in Somalia.

We now turn, in the remaining three chapters to the main findings of the present research. Specifically, I lay out the model, which I have developed inductively through the fieldwork interviews, of the three prospective vectors of social change in Somalia—namely, the diaspora, communication, and education. I have treat these summary vectors as categories that capture three different sub-processes. The Italoophone Somali diaspora believe that these are the most likely source of social change in Somalia. The present chapter deals with the diaspora as a vector of social change, while the analysis of communication as a vector of social change is taken up in detail in the next chapter (Chapter 9). To foreshadow briefly, this sub-process revolves around taking action, conveying messages, adopting 'communicative' behaviours, and pursuing a certain goal under the given circumstances. The discussion of education as a vector of social change follows in Chapter 10. As will be detailed much more extensively there, education—as outlined in Chapter 4—is an identity maker

and a common background shared by the entire Italoophone Somali diaspora. The diaspora identify it as the main source of social change, indeed as the panacea for all difficulties in Somalia today.

Against this background, it is worth reiterating again that social change is the concluding theme of the present research. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, this theme is reflected in the research methodology, which adopts the method of “versus coding”—drawing on binary terms to contrast and ascertain the conflicts among different groups and within social process—to highlight the key vectors of this process. This reflects the fact that social change is the concluding theme not only of the research but also of contemporary Somali society itself. As the last several chapters have laid out, the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora take a unified view on the central elements at play here. These include contrasting (and indeed contending) interpretations of what I am calling the Somali Tradition with a “capital T”, and the influence of key actors who insist on a set of contentious mechanisms to assert and retain social control over “the Masses”.

In developing this three-vector model, I dissected my interviewees’ narratives, unpacking the different components, while identifying recurring patterns and themes. I then reassembled these parts into chunks of meaning logically and theoretically relevant to the research questions. While reconstructing the data drawn from their statements and observations analytically, the approach nevertheless directly reflects the perspective of the Italoophone Somali diaspora as I have encountered it. It is thus a study of how the Italoophone Somali diaspora members project themselves in that transnational space that is Somalia today, and understand, or believe, social change to be and possibly to occur.

Like social change anywhere, the confrontation is between the forces defending the status quo, those favouring a return to the status quo ante, and those advocating for a new status quo in the future. Conservatives, reactionaries, and progressives (or reformists) stand opposed one against the other in a struggle where our common understanding of these concepts (as Europeans) has lost its usual meaning. The nature, character, and direction of these vectors of change depend on a range of distinct individual factors: age, setting, time, memory, background, social and cultural capital, and the like. Within this framework, older generations of Italoophone Somalis prove often more progressive than the newer generations of people living in Somalia. However, viewed from the perspective of the present, their approach is quite radical, if not reactionary. Their vision of social change is, indeed, a product of deeply nostalgic imaginary of the past, rather than a clear programme that could be realized in some concrete future. Social change, for the Italoophone Somalis, is a goal that they understand in

temporal rather than spatial terms and is heavily influenced by their experiences of living in the West. It is a vision that they tend to remit socially over time, rather than over space.

In fact, the Italoophone Somali diaspora has a particular understanding of change and of the ‘way forward’. This understanding reflects the interpretation of the last 50 or 60 years of Somali history, particularly as it has intertwined with their own diasporic history—their life stories and trajectories. On the one hand, they hold fast to the socio-cultural milieu they once belonged to and the political project they once shared and believed in, which still plays a major role in shaping their mindset. On the other, they have embraced the diasporic experience, which has influenced their attitudes and approach significantly.

However, the question to be asked at this stage is how the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora actually act under the current circumstances. As noted, they conceive of social change in terms of Somali social institutions. Broadly speaking they look at it as the lessening of the grip of the typically Somali forms of social control - tradition, clan, and Islam – over the Somali society. If adherence and demands for change vary almost individually in relation to each code, some patterns and general stances stand out. Among them, the strong focus on the religious code, on the interpretation of the religious message, and on what being a (good) Muslim entails today. More generally, their idea of social change centres more on the individual (rather than on the group), conceived as a possibly autonomous entity constantly attempting a compromise between self-reliance and reliance on others, between self-determination and adherence to the heteronomous rules deriving from Somali social institutions.

However, social change is potentially triggered by what the Italoophone Somali diaspora members actually do and say, apart from what they claim to be doing and saying. Basically, it is a process involving “communicated” ideas, values, and behaviours that links to the concept of social remittances. I introduced this link in the theoretical chapter when I presented social change as part of the discipline of Development Communication. In so doing, I have advanced the idea that there is a form of communication that is diffused, unofficial, and interpersonal that promotes and at times succeeds in bringing about social change. This form of communication runs on and across diasporic trajectories. It is not institutional, nor planned or programmed, but rather spontaneous and informal. It is a form of communication usually overlooked in modernization and the participatory theories. It is a new understanding of development communication and communication for social change that I

am putting forward after investigating the Somali context, but whose main tenets may hold true beyond this empirical case.

The remainder of this chapter addresses the question of the Somali diaspora writ large as a source and an agent of social change in itself. I first lay out in detail the process that I am referring to when speaking of diaspora as a vector of social change. I do so against the backdrop of the modernization theory and the proposed new understanding of development communication. In the final sections I outline the central role of *memories* in the formation of diasporic social change capital and then detail my findings on the diasporic strategies of “mass” social change. As it will become clear in the course of the chapter, the Italoophone Somali diaspora’s understanding of this process is considered as unquestionable by its members. Given that they are repositories of what I am calling social change capital, which other stakeholders in the Somali arena do not possess, the Italoophone Somali diaspora view the role that they have projected onto themselves as pre-eminent.

## The Elements of Social Change Capital

The members of the Somali diaspora remain positive about being part of a diasporic community, or having lived outside of the country for some extended period. This observation recurred throughout the fieldwork, through comments and reflections that they offered about their diasporic experience. I noted as well a common sense that their diasporic experience is what they see to be the *conditio sine qua non* for their claims to have superior status over those who have not had such an experience—namely, those they describe as having been “left behind”. My interlocutors see the diasporic experience as having given them capacities, skills or awareness that are assumed to be the most positive aspects of being part of a diaspora. These are assumed to apply to all members of the Somali diaspora though, provided that they are old enough to have experienced the same background as the Italoophone Somalis sub-group did.<sup>149</sup>

Many reflected often that their diasporic experience or having lived in Western countries for some period had “opened their eyes”—acting thus as a kind of “enlightenment” that they would have otherwise never benefited from had they never left Somalia. To Italoophone Somalis, it is this formative experience abroad that underpins their sense of self-consciousness, self-fulfilment and indeed of

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<sup>149</sup> Latecomers, on the wave of more recent migratory flows along *Tabriib* trajectories and experiences, do not get access to the same status.

superiority. Yet, as a key interlocutor of Somali issues commented during one of our discussions, “the Somali Diaspora was a Diaspora even before leaving the country”.<sup>150</sup> In Chapter 4, I have already given a (partial) account of this internal elite. What is meant by the statement above is that the diasporic experience adds to this original level of distinction from the people left behind, “the masses”, as my interviewees often refer to them, thus distancing the two even further.

Indeed, most of my interviewees look at their experience abroad as a form of socio-cultural “promotion” that lifted their social status. Time in the West, in short, has imbued them with a distinct stock of capital—capital that is cultural and, to a lesser extent, social, in the Bourdieusean sense. Having accumulated such capital, they feel in a position to lead, rather than being led, by those “left behind”. This is the common assumption behind their reasoning. The fact that they have been able to affirm themselves in such a “tough” context is the “living proof” of their worth. They believe to make an impression in the eyes of their counterparts back home, because they “have made it”—they have acquired expertise, understanding, and knowledge that further enhances their original standing.

To sum up, the Italoophone Somali diaspora has coupled original stocks of cultural and social capital acquired through education at home with new stocks acquired in the diaspora. The resulting combined accumulation constitutes what I am calling *social change capital*—the knowledge and capability to bring about change by addressing and leading the people “left behind” along a path to progress, they claim. Italoophone Somali diaspora members can look, from without, at how things are, have been, or are expected to be, based on the Somali (traditional) culture and the governing social institutions. As the sole custodians of this accumulated social change capital, the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora assume for themselves (and the diaspora writ large) the right and the responsibility of advancing social change as they see it.

In the following sections, I turn to discuss in further detail the five key elements of this accumulated social change capital—namely: 1) cultural background; 2) a sense of diasporic enlightenment; 3) self-esteem and social capital; 4) religious capital, and; 5) memories.

### *Cultural Background*

As discussed in Chapter 4, the background of the Italoophone Somali diaspora has reflected the influence of Italian-sponsored education at home and abroad, as well as the contact with the Italian

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<sup>150</sup> Interview with Ambassador Giorgio Giacomelli (1930–2017) who represented Italy in Somalia in the period 1973–1976.

cultural milieu more generally. Building on this educational experience, other forms of civic engagement in Somalia and abroad have also played a crucial role in underpinning the accumulation of social and cultural capital among this group. I am referring, among others, to the experience of how things were organized and expected to develop during the first years of Siad Barre's rule, during the so-called "period of the enthusiasm" (1969–75). Many among my interviewees can hardly conceal the prestige of being associated with that distinctive group of people, which was meant to modernize the country and prepare for the "great leap forward".

Many believe that their contribution can make a difference, and that Somalia with their input can eventually move forward. They look at themselves as the human resources that Somalia "so badly needs" today. The following remarks speak to this point:

I'm one of the last one to have studied in Italian, and I belong to that diaspora that can bridge Somalia (10:19)

With this type of background, we all have a PhD [...] we can make a contribution (17:149)

[My] cultural background makes [me] see the future (22:100)

All these people that have studied and that have been urbanized [they can make a difference] (2:46).

The knowledge gained abroad—the West being perceived as the font of all erudition—is seen to have added to the cultural capital accumulated during their elite education in Somalia. As Geddi, a returnee to Benadiir, puts it:

I consider myself privileged to have studied in Italy and to have travelled to many countries, where I met people from all over the world and of all possible religions. In the West, if you want to remain an ignorant [person], you have to fight for it, quite hard. You would have to go out of your way to avoid the well-stocked libraries and the many bookshops that exist and you would have to ignore the many public debates organized by cultural institutions that are everywhere and freely accessible. Not to mention museums and theatre shows. In the West, you will invariably stumble on knowledge and scholarship wherever you turn [...]. These conditions are what allow a country to progress (27:38).

This type of attitude does not imply though the rejection of the mother culture. All my interlocutors still cherish and consider their origin culture fundamental. Gurey, while commenting his engagement in a ‘development’ project back home, says (8:11):

I believe that my diaspora social experience and the scientific knowledge I acquired in Europe can play a positive role, while enhancing the quality of such a [development] project, [but only] if it is carefully adjusted to the reality of the targeted community, [i.e.] to their way of living, beliefs and priorities.

The position of Gurey is actually revelatory of a widespread syncretism among my interviewees. He embodies a compromise between different cultural traditions, rather than completely surrendering to a supposedly superior one, as has often been lamented about Westernized (Somalis) intellectuals (Bulhan 2013a and 1980, Cappelli 2011: 15–17). Many others that I interviewed advanced similar opinions. For the oldest generations in the Somali diaspora, then, it is their education, training and experience—whether acquired at home or in the West—that qualifies this group as a vanguard of social change. In addition, it is the dimension of critical self-awareness acquired in this experience that is seen as counting the most.

#### *A Sense of Diasporic “Enlightenment”*

A second component of accumulated social change capital is a sense of “enlightenment” brought about by contact with the West, a “breakthrough” associated with leaving the country and thus looking at it “through different eyes”. In light of the institutions and mechanisms of social control outlined in the previous chapters, many of my interlocutors noted this as a “liberating” experience. Some even described it in terms akin to “opening one’s eyes”, and eventually being able to truly “see”. Many, indeed, cast it as a kind of “secular” revelation produced in light of the modernist posture many had already adopted prior to leaving.

Apparently, the main physical sense involved in this process is the sight. Statements from various interlocutors reinforce this point. These include: “We have seen how things work here in Europe, in America, where there is transparency, where the press controls the government, and you cannot afford to do anything that pleases you” (1:21), and “here in Europe there is information, and there are things that you learn not only from a political point of view” (9:32). Among women, these types of comments tend to be gender-oriented: “[Those women] who live here in Europe have seen how

things are; they have opened up their eyes; they have seen that they have rights” (24:65). Europe, the West, is perceived as a place for comparing how things should be done and settled, ultimately work.

The diasporic experience works as an independent frame or benchmark for assessing the value of aspects of the culture and social institutions. Most of the Italophone Somalis I interviewed, for example, have reconsidered their perspective on the clan in the light of their diasporic experience. Even if this claim does not correspond to a real change in their public behaviour, it is described as radical frame-breaking change in their inner beliefs. The following excerpts from interviews reinforce this point: “as long as I was there I could see only the clan, that was my only reality” (13:19), “as long as you are in Somalia you can only see Somalia” (22:97); “me too when I was there I used to think in the same way [as those affected by clannism]” (11:26). Along the same lines, others commented that “Now [having been abroad] I have changed; I no longer believe in what I used to believe” (18:7); “when I was studying in Mogadishu, I thought that all Somalis had the same [clan] privileges [as I did], but when I came to the UK, I started to realize, and to appreciate Lewis [referring to Lewis’ seminal study of the clan system in Somalia]” (22:67). Another telling comment along this line of thinking is the following:

I have never lost my [clan] belonging, and I do not want to lose it, but my mentality has changed enormously. I no longer think in terms of the logic of the clan, and I can’t tell whether this depends on where I live or [just] because I have grown up (13:22).

On many occasions, I noted interlocutors’ observations that their diasporic experience had radically transformed their values, giving access to new (old) values while disclosing additional perspectives on the true value or worth of a given perspective or aspect of the culture. Consistently, the central aspect they referred to was the supreme value of *respecting difference*—be it for themselves or for others. Being diaspora is not only about (potentially) opening up one’s eyes and being able to see, while liberating the people from certain forms of mass control. It is also about re-discovering or just acquiring new-old moral principles, at least claimed ones. On many accounts, the diasporic experience has been central to the development of self-awareness and the positioning of the self in a wider social context. It makes sense to reiterate the words of Bilal, a returnee to Mogadishu:

In Denmark, I have learned important values, among them the Jante's rules.<sup>151</sup> There is always someone above you, who knows more than you do, who is richer than you are. I have digested these rules; I have discussed them with myself [...]. People are all the same; everybody has the right to live and to eat; if you do not accept your neighbour you won't be accepted in turn; you have to accept everybody, without any political, religious, or racial distinction. I didn't know any of these values before; I learned them in Europe, and after so many years spent in Europe I think I have something more to offer, that I can put into effect in Somalia [...]. All those who have lived in Europe, they know the secret of life, they know very well what life is, the value of life, not like us [in Somalia who have] become accustomed to seeing dead bodies amassed in the street (7:71).

Some Italoophone Somali diaspora members claim to have acquired the value of life, respect for diversity, and a sense of self and of others only after going abroad. Living in a (Western) society—where as one noted, “you have to gain people's respect” (10:125)—they have rediscovered the meaning of life: “Before coming to Italy, I did not know what it meant to live” (18:4). Within this framework, many Italoophone Somali diaspora members stressed the importance of open debate and discussion and of diversity more generally. As Geddi puts it, “I do not believe I would be the same person if I hadn't lived in the West [...]; the exchange of ideas that someone manages to develop in a Western context has no comparison with other countries” (27:53).

In conclusion, for most of my interviewees the diasporic experience has been an “enlightening” one that has “qualified” them to lead and to adopt a superior position in relation to others “left behind”. They all seem to agree on this point, irrespective of their social status. The words of Xabiib, now a construction worker in Italy, reflect a general view that I noted among all my interviewees: “the Somalis from Somalia will never be able to bring about change. Leaving the country is necessary to be able to change it. You need to have a practical and theoretical experience of things if you want to show and replicate them” (18:23). Much about Xabiib's apparent modernist commitments and assumptions are revealed in this comment.

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<sup>151</sup> Bilal is referring here to the so-called Law of Jante (*Janteloven*, in Danish). It is a code of conduct known in Nordic countries, which portrays doing things out of the ordinary and being overtly personally ambitious. Instead, it puts society ahead of the individual, who should not boast about personal accomplishments or be jealous of others.

### *Self-Esteem, Pride and Social Capital*

A third major component of the accumulated social change capital is the affect of self-esteem. Such self-esteem reflects the experience of having being able to “get things done” while living as foreigners in the West. Members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora see their success in completing university degrees, entering professional careers and acquiring economic capital as indicators of their personal capabilities and as proof that they are valuable and competent. Many are keen to convey a sense of their own lives as being successful on the basis that as foreigners in an often challenging and hostile environment they were able to “compete” with the native-born. Repeatedly in interviews, it was this sense of having “achieved despite adversity” that came to the fore. For the members of the Somali diaspora, this experience drives their confidence to return to Somalia and communicate their apparently “superior” knowledge and expertise because having left and seen other places, they now “know it better”.

As mentioned, in the narratives of the Italoophone Somalis, “success”, “achievement” and “triumph over adversity” are constant foregrounded themes. Although my positionality might have played a role here,<sup>152</sup> I refer to comments such as the following:

I made myself noticed; I asked interesting questions (10:2)

I’m good at [that] (10:6)

They noticed me at MAECI<sup>153</sup> (10:17)

In the USA, I could have had a political career; I could be a senator right now (15:59)

My university is the best one in Somalia, as confirmed by the Somali Ministry of Education (15:62)

I had the idea [first] (23:24)

I did that, together with [...]; everybody agreed on my proposal (23:56–57)

My professors from Perugia were so proud of me that they offered to [help me further] (27:1).

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<sup>152</sup> Most probably, their being the object of this research study made them feel the need to “prove” to their interlocutor their being somehow special. Within this context, given the importance they usually attach to education, their interacting with a researcher by “profession” may help explain further such a posture.

<sup>153</sup> MAECI is the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (Ministero degli Affari Esteri e Cooperazione Internazionale).

Women fall as well in this kind of pattern, as evidenced by the following:

And so I gave my interview, and I have been very much appreciated, as a strong woman (17:180).

I'm different from the others (25:51).

I have very high self-esteem" (26:40).

In my observations in the field, I noted a strong desire to highlight skills, competences and expertise in public as a "measure" of how far they have come in "developing" themselves through education and training. This chimes of course with a certain modernist understanding of social development, here refracted at the level of the individual. At the same time, the public presentation of self shows a clear sense of satisfaction in what has been inherited from their Somali background, upbringing, and social capital. These two, not conflicting but certainly in tension, attributes appear to be two sides of the same coin of the affect of "pride", which was detailed more fully in Chapter 6.

Additionally, the cultural capital, and the self-esteem or proudness attached to it, is to be appreciated in combination with a purportedly strong social capital. The social capital complement or comes to the rescue every time the cultural capital falls short to its goals. They both work as walking sticks to the Italo-phone Somali diaspora member. Hence, they make frequently reference to their connections and proximity with those actually in power, as their social capital is basically understood and appreciated. The following points underscore this:

That project received a letter of endorsement from President \*\*\*\*\* (17:147).

I have spoken about it [an ongoing project] with the current president of Puntland \*\*\*\*\*" (17:148).

I talked over the phone with Craxi [...] the entire responsibility for dealing with the situation lay with me; the care of General Siad Barre, the dictator, was my responsibility (23:17, 23:19).<sup>154</sup>

I have treated the president of Puntland and the Prime Minister (23:41).

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<sup>154</sup> At the time of Siad Barre's car accident, in May 1986, to which the quote refers, Bettino Craxi was Italy's Prime Minister.

We have four or five friends who are in the government, including Prime Minister \*\*\*\*\*, as well as Minister of Education \*\*\*\*\*, and four Senators in the parliament (26:28).

We have friends who are very powerful; the most powerful man in Somalia today is my cousin; he is the best friend of the President \*\*\*\*\* (26:31).

As said, many Somalis claim their very strong relationship with personalities and people of power in Somalia. If, on the one hand it is a way to sell their social capital, on the other hand it is a mark of their quest for recognition and need for protection. In this way, they maybe try to underpin their self-esteem, while reassuring themselves and their interlocutors that they are worthy. All this serves the same objective: to legitimize their sense of being in a position to do or influence things. In other words, they represent a component of what I am referring to here as social change capital.

### *Religious Capital and Interpretation*

The members of the Italoophone Somali Diaspora are the bearers of a certain religious capital, which I have essentially defined in juxtaposition to the new interpreters' religious capital. More in particular, in Chapter 5, I have elaborated on "What is Radical" in their eyes, and I expanded further about it in the subsequent section on "Islam and Islams", "Ordinary and Radical Interpreters" (Chapter 6). There I presented their understanding of the religious code and the main tenets of their being ordinary interpreters of the religious message. Among these, they tend to keep the political and the religious realms separated, to distinguish between state and religion, between secular and confessional. It is within this context that they put forward an interpretation of the religious message that is, reportedly, never totalitarian and leaves scope for "religious freedom". By this, they mean the possibility for different interpretations, not necessarily aligned with new and old dominant ones, including the possibility of not being religious at all or of having different credos.

Liberalism and tolerance are central themes of my interviewees' religious capital. They are a shared feature across individual stances toward religion, whose understanding is never monolithic. The interpretation of the religious message seems in fact a common principle and resource among most of, if not all of my interviewees. They allow and look at it as a possibility to adjust and re-adjust the religious message to the changing reality out there, the contemporary world, to oppose deviant and radical readings, to mitigate and dilute the most disconcerting and puzzling wordings. "It is a matter of interpretation" they recursively comment, while they mention it as a keyword with multiple

meanings: as a faculty, as a way out, and as a resource.<sup>155</sup> On many occasions, they point in the direction that the word itself opens up, whenever they question the status quo, or try to make a few points that prove particularly dear to them, to their background, and their social change capital more generally. Their comments can be grouped around following main issues: 1) the need to convey the proper image and understanding about Islam; 2) the need to review some religious precepts in light of changed historical, cultural, and environmental circumstances; 3) the need to clarify in Islam who is in a position to interpret the message for the masses, for the people—in other words, the role of the intermediaries— and; 4) the need to clarify once and for all the abuses of acting on behalf of God or any other religious principle, notably with regards to the possibility, given or not given in Islam, to correct the mistakes of others. It is around these four themes that representatives of the Italoophone Somali diaspora concentrate most of their attention and claims.

### **The “proper” Image of Islam**

Within this context, my interlocutors tend to highlight certain features about Islam that seem to have been lost or neglected in the present. They underline the fact that Islam is a peaceful religion, and that has nothing to do with violence and backwardness. For instance, as in the words of Hodan “now all Muslims are [considered] terrorists, but this hatred towards the Western world does not exist, in the Quran there is a Sura which invites us to respect our neighbour—nobody ever said to make all this mess” (11:53). Maxamed makes a similar point: “Look, I haven’t much time, but recently I started to study the Muslim religion, it is a wonderful thing! It wouldn’t harm a fly!” (15:37). Beydaan echoes this, noting, “Once, the world of Islam allowed for the reconciliation of faith and progress, because Islam is peace and serenity, without violence” (3:70). At the same time, they describe Islam as a religion without constraint, without obligation, the observance of whose precepts is absolutely free. As Guuleed puts it (10:55) “what the Muslims need to understand is that they cannot oblige anybody, the Sura 3” – while he quotes it fluently in Arab - “means that there is no duress in religion” and he continues (10:68) “for instance I set the alarm at 5:45 am to stand up and pray, I have this faculty, it is my choice, I am free to do that”. In addition, he concludes “what I think is that God created us gratis and free, He created us and then left us” (10:52). Cilmi shares this same view when he says (14:62) “they assume that you are born Muslim, but instead you become Muslim”.

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<sup>155</sup> Interpretation as a faculty is linked to reason and rationality, as I shall discuss in more detail in Chapter 9.

## **Reviewing Certain Islamic Precepts**

Sometimes my interlocutors venture the need to review some classical religious precepts, on account of the fact that they reflect more past and remote circumstances than actual needs and opportunities in the present day Somalia. In other words, they put these precepts in historical perspective. I reproduce a few remarks of this kind here below. They are meant to suggest a more general undercurrent rather than provide for an exhaustive list. Amiin says (9:22) “I, for instance, I’m Muslim, but in the face of certain things I do not limit myself to the mere religious precepts”. In more detail, I have registered comments on a range of themes, from the practice of polygamy, to dietary prescriptions or restrictions. Beydaan says “I’m 100% Muslim, but can you tell me please, what is the meaning of having two or three wives? How can you look after your children, and the kids, if they are scattered here and there, how can they grow with a sense of belonging and self-esteem?” (3:85). Others seem to question other traditional aspects of the Islamic culture, such as the request to abstain from drinking alcohol or eating pork meat. In the words of Gurey “we could re-read many important points. Take for instance the principle that you cannot eat pork. In the historical period when this precept was laid down, there were obvious health and other justifications [that no longer apply]... or take the prohibition against drinking alcohol, it was instituted for real historical reasons” (8:24). Nevertheless, in every case my participants stress their identity as Muslims while citing particular precepts of the religion concerning individual behaviour as having “outgrown” their historical reasons.

## **Religious Knowledge and the Role of Intermediaries**

The religious subject is extremely vast, my interlocutors state assertively, and not everybody can be expected to be conversant with it. It is a matter of knowledge, ultimately of power, as my interlocutors frame it. Feeling inadequate or just unsure about this vast body of scholarship and precepts, including the Quran and the Hadiths, has two main implications. On the one hand, it can make people more manipulable and prone to do or believe things or practices that may not—at least according to mainstream interpretations—even derive directly from these source. On the other hand, it might posit the need for intermediaries. As to the first aspect, Hodan says:

I know the Quran very well. They cannot cheat on me, I know how to reply. Allah never ordered me to stay home, not to work, not to talk to anybody; it is not written anywhere. I

am free, I was born free, once I have prayed and I have respected the people, I have done what is requested from me (11:53).

These words are revealing of a diffused sentiment among the Italoophone Somali diaspora, especially among women. They strenuously defend their own understanding of the religious message, or just claim to do so in public, based on their usual reading and knowledge of the holy sources, at least when they can rely on a solid foundation. Of course being in a position “to reply”, to refute prescriptions or to back liberties’ claims can be a great resource in order to face always more pervasive forms of religious control over life and spaces of the self.

As to the second aspect instead, the question of intermediaries is highly debated also among my interlocutors, as a sign of the high consideration in which it is held. The existence of religious intercessors between the normal believers and God is also central in Islam (Lewis 1998, Vercellin 1996: 230–269), although, the lack of a formalized hierarchy is purportedly one of the main features distinguishing it from other religions, notably the Christianity. Islam in general (and Somali Islam in particular) has seen over the years various schools of interpretation and authoritative interpreters develop.<sup>156</sup> Thus, in Islam the religious scholars—within their own schools and communities of practice—are the authorities that validate religious practice and the limits of religious conduct. In many interviews, members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora posed questions about the capacity and the preparation of this class of people, whom they now see committed to promote an idea of Islam that they do not share. As Amiin puts it (9:49):

We Muslims we miss exactly this—precisely what certain criminals exploit with both hands: who is supposed to be responsible to represent the Muslims? In a true and legitimate way? Who is responsible for talking on behalf of all Muslims, who is it? It has never been defined.

Many of my interlocutors are quite critical of those playing this role in Somalia. As Magan puts it (2:12, 2:35):

Enough with these Imams [he says *santone* in Italian] that can say whatever they want in the Mosques [...] a Mufti cannot go to tell all the stories he wants in the Mosque, it is a matter of interests; people are often ignorant and manipulable, these in Somalia collect the *zakat* [he says *colletta* in Italian]; they control everything [...] who is regulating all this? The Quran needs

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<sup>156</sup> Among them ‘Alim and Ulamā, Imām, Khalīfa, Khatīb, Faqīh, Qādī, Muftī, Shaykh and the theological and juridical schools, the Madhāhib. See more in Vercellin (1996).

it interpreters; every Sura, and every verse within the Sura, requires its interpretation or reasoning about how it is derived and why it arrived in a certain way.

Gurey proposes a solution, internal to Islam. He says “now there are many youngsters who have studied better and in depth at the university; they are the ones that should preach that we abandon of certain practices and taboos, with religious explanations, making explicit that this or that does not correspond to the dictates of the religion” (8:25). Guuleed, although religiously more observant, is more or less of the same opinion. He says “I have studied and listened to various Ulema, I never heard them talking about killing the people [...] they didn’t speak from the point of view of moderate Islam, like many would wish today, but rather traditional Islam; they never attacked the people”. He goes on to say, “we have to teach the people the right religion, everything depends on who it is doing the teaching” (10:69). Finally, among my interlocutors there are also those who do not fully recognize the role of any intermediary or teacher and understand religion as a private relationship between the individual with God. Aaden says

But then again, the true and devoted Muslim does not need the mediation of anybody, of any Imam [he says *santone* in Italian]; he does not go to the Mosque, he is in direct contact with God. You know [as a Muslim] that there is a superior entity, you never go to ask for a man [religious scholar] like you for help, like in Christianity (22:55).

However, to be able to hold to this kind of conviction and stand firmly in the face of current religious trends, people need a strong foundation, which seems to be quite rare among the Somalis today, as my interlocutors tend to point out.

### **Acting on behalf of God**

For my interlocutors, “acting on behalf of God” is a central—if not the central—theme. For them, what matters most in Islam is whether or not someone has the right “to act on behalf of God” and to justify their actions based on “God’s will”. My interlocutors point to the main temptation within such a context as being the idea of having the power and the authority “to correct mistakes”. They mention on more than one occasion a Hadith of the Prophet from which this power would descend. Guuleed quotes it, skilfully in Arab first, and then in Italian (10:66): “if someone among you sees something wrong, he has to use his hands to correct it, if he cannot make it with his hands he has to use the tongue, the words, if he cannot make it with the words, then he has to hate it within his

heart”.<sup>157</sup> The interpretation of this verse is quite controversial, a few among my interlocutors explain, and the cause of some of the most disruptive misunderstandings within Islam, as they tend to refer to it. Nobody, they put forward, has this right or authority and nobody can physically correct things or take himself or herself as an effective remedy for wrong or evils. In this vein, Bilal says “I do not act on behalf of anybody, everybody, or God, nor on behalf of all Muslims taken together, I am not called to do anything on behalf of Islam!” (7:83). Amiin, who acknowledges the need for a form of hierarchy, puts it in this way “the religion says that ‘if you kill one person you kill the whole of mankind’, the Hadith goes like this [...] it is not that anyone, any Muslim is asked to clean up or correct anything, no Muslim has this responsibility, only the responsible authorities within the community” (9:47). Guuleed touches again upon this point when he mentions Al-Shabaab: “It is Al-Shabaab who kill you if you don’t pray or don’t adhere to the Quran, they use a power that is not theirs [...] the only thing to which Islam obliges you is to give some advice, to our brothers, because you do not want that your brother get lost, but this is it” (10:54). Within this context the position of Aaden seems quite representative of a diffused sentiment (22:52):

Al-Itihaad is a creation of the Wahhabists, of which Al-Shabaab is another, more recent, version. With these, if you exit the Mosque they kill you, if you enter the Mosque they kill you. But you cannot kill someone who is praying to God and wants to live in peace. Or they see someone, and they take a knife, like you kill a sheep, or they cut his hand saying it is ‘in the name of God’. This is like going back to the situation in the 7th century; we are no longer up to the standards of an acceptable Islam”.

## **Manifesting Commitments to Modernization and Westernization**

At first sight, most of my interviewees seem to be driven by a modernization outlook. In the realm of development communication this remains the dominant approach, in line with all those developmental efforts that typically see the West engaged with the developing one, as many scholars have rightly pointed out (Melkote and Steeves, Wilkins, Servaes, Thomas, van de Fliert, Tufte, Gumucio-Dragon, Escobar, to quote just a few). Basically, modernization—also referred to as Westernization—is a way to think of and implement development. It reflects the dominant

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<sup>157</sup> Actually, the Hadith, in one of its widespread versions is written as follows: “If one of you sees something wrong, let him change it with his hand; if he cannot, then with his tongue; if he cannot, then with his heart and this is the weakest faith”.

understanding and practice of the concept among the most developed countries, which are also the leading donors, and tend to replicate their experience across completely different contexts and cultures. In terms of social and economic change, or combatting poverty, the underlying assumption behind modernization can be summarized as follows: developing countries should embrace the path traced by the developed countries, which is also a proof of their success. In order to achieve this goal, Western countries tend to export development projects and technological equipment assuming that in so doing they will ultimately ‘export’ development itself. By implanting these projects in recipient countries, a process of ‘development’ is supposedly triggered. Ideas, goods, and practices are supposed to circulate and disseminate across the society, over urban and rural spaces, while triggering as well a process of (social) change. As a result, the local economy is expected to reproduce (almost) the same stages of economic development as experienced by the West (Rostow 1960, Rogers 2006). Similarly, forms of organization of the *res publica* should also follow suit. As a result, democratization, freedom, capabilities, and respect for human rights—appreciated as ‘development’ indicators in their own right (Sen 1999, Nussbaum 2011)—are expected to ‘naturally’ develop over time.

It is against this backdrop that I wish to detail the attitudes, personal stances, and stated preferences of the members of my sample. Apparently, the same assumption that (irrationally) inspires modernization projects lies at the core of their diasporic engagement. At least on the surface, members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora seem to be inspired by a similar understanding. They assert the belief that they have ‘seen’ what development is first hand and are thus equipped to bring it to realization in Somalia. They stress that this ‘first-hand’ experience makes them ideal “developers”, “multipliers”, “mobile personalities”, “early adopters”, and the like. In this language, one finds echoes of the kinds of terms and discourses advanced by the work of scholars such as Lerner and other early modernization theorists, and, indeed, their later variants (Lerner 1958, Schramm 1964, Rogers 2003, Salih 2007). The direction of change that the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora seek to advance through the social change capital they have accumulated cannot simply be reduced to an affinity with the discourses of modernization theory, however. Observed in more detail, the various ‘lessons’ from the West drawn by the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora are actually quite varied.

Indeed, we see a range of views here, from the seemingly credulous presumption that the West is superior and the supreme measure of ‘progress’, to more critical and nuanced stances. At their most uncritical, my interviewees would point selectively to the economic and technological development of the West, a model they would argue should be transferred—copy–pasted even—from the original

context to the new. For those among my interlocutors offering more nuanced opinions, the Western world and its level of development are understood as a product of distinct cultural and social institutions and customs—including a consideration for civil rights and other humanitarian values. In these cases, the more critical reasoning tends to adopt a more selective approach that stresses the need for Western ways to be adapted, adjusted, or translated to preserve and accommodate Somali culture, traditions and natural environment.

Among those who would see a wholesale transfer of the Western model, there are some who take some explicit exemplar state as a comparator for development. For example, Absimil, a returnee based in Mogadishu says “from a social point a view [progress] is towards a civil society that is educated, civilized, a modern society... such as in the Western countries” (6:4). He continues “in other words USA would be the model” (6:6), concluding that “I would like Somalia to become like the USA; I feel I belong to that community [as] I’m an American citizen” (6:36). His views are echoed by Caaisho, a female returnee also based in Mogadishu, who says:

When you have seen a big country, with a lot of opportunity, just by watching it—its people, the buildings, the street—you notice a big difference compared to Somalia, and in your mind and soul, you tell yourself ‘oh, if only Somalia was like this!’ And now in Somalia I am the mirror of America; I want to implement those ideas, make Somalia look like America (26:19).

The model others cite is Denmark, Italy, or the UK (depending on their country of destination in the diaspora), or more generally ‘Europe’. As Guuleed, puts it “one day we will arrive where Europe is now, while Europe will have gone further” (10:106).

As they are framing these places as a model for Somalia, the consistent theme that is foregrounded is the level of economic development. Development understood as ‘technology’ is discussed as a neutral force by all, and does not pose particular problems, either to the pious or to the conservative among my interlocutors in the Italophone Somali diaspora. Indeed, it is ‘technology’ that is the clear vector they have in mind when speaking of ‘development’ and ‘progress’. As Faduma puts it “still in 2014 few of the herders [in Somalia] possessed even a single refrigerator [...] we in the diaspora, we are the ones who must introduce the refrigerator [to them]” (16:16). She appears quite confident that this will happen, sooner or later. Indeed, such forms of technological transfer appear to be springing up in Mogadishu where an American returnee has set up a modern cattleshed [*ma stalla* in Italian] to replace the classic enclosure typical in nomadic herding. Faduma recounts how this new operation is working along Western lines, noting “everything is documented and analysed, like

in Europe. This is what we are supposed to be doing in all sectors, including construction, farming, and health care” (16:20).

Along similar lines, what many Italoophone Somalis have ‘learned by doing’ in the exercise of their professions, in their qualifications or their studies in the West or elsewhere is ‘the model’. They note repeatedly that for them, ‘being professional’ in Somalia should map the professional standards and practices as they occur in the West. As Bilal puts it “I gained a PhD, and thanks to that I was able to work for many years abroad. I want to put what I have learned into practice, in my country too” (7:6). Taban, a permanent diaspora member based in Italy offers the same perspective, proposing that “everybody can bring his own idea, his own field of production, what he has learned” (23:52). Continuing with the theme of ‘transfer’, he notes “we could organize some exchanges, youngsters could come here [to Europe] for 2–3 months, learn something [valuable] and then return [to implement it]” (23:54).

As mentioned, there also more critical stances towards the West. Some Italoophone Somali diaspora members are preoccupied to underline that there are institutions, cultural and social habits that cannot be transplanted and made grow in a Somali context, “it does not work like that”. This type of remarks revolve more around social, political, and cultural aspects, rather than the mere economic or technological spheres, as I have noted above.

From a gender perspective for instance, many women are quite aware of the level of freedom (at least in principle), independence, and access to human rights enjoyed in Western countries, including the state welfare system.<sup>158</sup> As Beydaan puts it “Italy remains a model of civilisation in comparison to my country [...] democracy, rights and obligations, honesty, the rule of law [are all present ...]” (3:72; 3:43). However, as it pertains to what might be feasibly achieved in Somalia in their lifetimes, my interlocutors are far more cautious. As Sagal notes “it is not possible at this stage a form of European-style democracy [in Somali]; it is not accepted for women and men to be on the same level” (5:21). In the same vein, she notes:

You cannot transport it [European democracy] wholesale. Sometimes here in London women meet up as a group [and] there are those who say ‘I also want to be able to vote in Somalia, the same as I do here’, but I ask them ‘are you detached from reality?’ We have to proceed in

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<sup>158</sup> They work as a threat to the economic and traditional dominance of the Somali male, whose role is often put into question. As a result, many Somali families in the diaspora break up, and women become fully independent, no longer under the economic tutelage of men.

lock-step with our culture, our religion—we cannot skip some stages [as] it is a [long] process that requires time (5:24).

Ayaan touches upon another gender issue. After praising “the number and the quality of rights enjoyed by women in other [Western] countries”, she offers a criticism of the way in which women—especially women’s bodies—appear to be objectified in the West. She says (17:136) “something that I would leave where it is, is the concept of the woman-object, which is so popular in the West. Especially among young girls, also in Italy, the woman has been extremely objectivized”.

Members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora are thus generally of the view that adjustments and flexibility will be required in bringing about social change in Somalia. Thus, the general (albeit not universal) view is that development and change are not a mere process of ‘transplantation’ from one (Western) context to another (i.e. Somalia). I return to the quote of Gurey cited earlier that any development project in Somalia needs “careful adaptation to the reality of that particular community” (8:11). He referred to local “ways of living, beliefs, and priorities”. Similarly, Aaden is very critical of those indiscriminately promoting development as process merely mimicking the Western path. As he puts it “I don’t like those who want to import models from other experiences when they do not know very well their own society, culture, tradition, and their adaptability” (22:65), given that “they are always dangerous, and they import things for which they ignore their potential impact on the Somali society, for instance the political parties!” (22:69)

To briefly summarize the discussion laid out in this subsection, members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora generally embrace discourses and modes of thought that reflect and echo classic modernization and Westernization themes, particularly in the economic and technological realms. Nevertheless, they add a long list of distinctions and nuances when the focus shifts to social-cultural and political aspects, democracy included. The broader social change capital that they have accumulated over the years is the source of inspiration and guidance for them as they ponder they way forward.

It is at this point that we must return to the question of *memories*. Touched on earlier, they are a crucial dimension of the process. They are—as I shall detail further in the next section—a reservoir of modernization ideals and policies that hark from post-independence (1960) up to the first years of Scientific Socialism (1969–75), if not later. Those years, as we shall see, are less compromised by what would later become the regime’s ‘totalitarian drift’. Almost all the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora I spoke with cite memories from this time, which they see as an unparalleled example of

how well things worked when Somalia was a proper state under strong leadership within the African continent.<sup>159</sup> Memories are central to this background. They work as a source of inspiration from the past and as ideals to pursue in the future. I turn now to discuss their role in further detail, thus completing the general overview of the key elements of the social change capital as introduced earlier in this Chapter.

## **Memories: The Projection of Modernist Ideals through Time**

Somalia gained independence from Britain and Italy in 1960. During the nine years of parliamentary democracy, the country embraced a political course where traditional Somali values and acquired Western practices appeared to be reconciled. This process, and the modernisation ideals that went hand in hand with it, accelerated when a socialist government came to power, at the end of the 1960s. As laid out in Chapter 4, Siad Barre seized power in Somalia in 1969 at the head of a military junta. His military government was aided by a civilian council of ministers, tasked with devising and implementing a programme of true Scientific Socialism. Here it suffices to recall the deeply modernizing posture and nature of the programme itself, which it was thought would thrust Somalia many rungs up the development ladder in one bound. The model reflected a rather incongruous mix of socialism and Islam, tradition and progress, anti-colonialism and national pride. In the cities especially, these years were celebrated among large parts of the population. Yet, criticism and disillusionment also accompanied this phase of Somali history, especially among those anchored most firmly to a certain religious Somali tradition. A turning point came at the end of 1974, when the regime executed ten ulamas forever alienating the most religious segment of the population.<sup>160</sup>

As mentioned above, these first years of the Siad Barre regime (tentatively 1969–75), but also the period antecedent to it in some cases, are recalled by the Italoophone Somali diaspora as something of a halcyon period, of restored national pride, collective enthusiasm and hope (Cappelli 2010: 37).<sup>161</sup> My interlocutors vaguely recall it when talking in idealized terms about the future of Somalia, as they see it as a period of “peak progress” for the Somali state and society. Nostalgia tends to soften

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<sup>159</sup> Lewis adopts a similar periodisation (2002: 205) titling his chapter 10 “The Somali Revolution: 1969–76”.

<sup>160</sup> A “confessional” account of these events can be found in Abdhullahi (2010). For a more secular reading, see Aden Sheikh (2010: 94–107): “Il giorno in cui furono uccisi gli Ulema”.

<sup>161</sup> Cappelli, who spent almost two decades in Somalia (1973–1990), refers in his book to the 1969–75 period as “Il tempo della speranza” [“The time of hope”] (Cappelli 2011: 37).

memories and improve perceptions of the “good old days”, especially when the present is miserable and challenging (Keightley & Pickering 2012). This is no different in Somalia for the Italoophone Somali diaspora (Ramsden and Ridge 2013, Trunji 2015: xxi). Indeed, nostalgia is something readily discernible among my interviewees. Spurred by high levels of despair, memory is a definite anchor, a reference and a *point de repère* or benchmark against which today’s Somalia is compared, judged, and assessed.

### *Remembered Dignity*

My interlocutors recall the post-WWII era, up until the 1969–75 period, as one in which ‘dignity’, as they term it, was far more prevalent. Keightley and Pickering (2012) note that as memories are recalled from a mythologized past, they become softer and this is one of the concluding themes of the way my interlocutors re-imagine the period. Here, the ideas of ‘pride’ and ‘nobility’, detailed in previous chapters, come to the fore, instantiated as recalled memories of halcyon days. Sagal, who is now approaching retirement age in the UK, expresses the point this way:

I feel quite strong bonds with Somalia, when times were safe, my childhood, how it was; my kids have not been as lucky as I have. There was freedom back then, a culture of being proud, of being who you are. Nomads are like that; even if they have nothing, they feel they are strong (5:55).

Similarly, Uba reveals memories that convey a set of deep feelings: “I’m a bit nostalgic, I would like the country to become again what it was during the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, when people were not afraid [and] were more open [and] there was no discrimination between Qabiile [clans]. People were more proactive; people were more honest” (24:19). Dignity, self-respect, independence—these are themes that are repeated in the recalling of the past.

Back then, disputes and clan issues were regulated by *xeer* and local agreements, reportedly the system proved to work. As Magan points out “it has been always like that, we have always relied on the *xeer*, on our customary law” (2:45). Clannism is remembered more as an identity institution rather than a mobilizing force or tool for driving conflict. Others report that—especially in the cities—the clan actually almost fell in a sort of oblivion. My interviewee Caisho recalls, “to tell you the truth, when we were young [...] the clan was not so important; we didn’t even know to which clan we belonged, we could not tell that about our fellows” (26:27). The role of the clan back then was

different, my interviewees claim. It was rather a political tool for the management and the organization of the *res publica*, as Cilmi explains:

There were the various clans, and the Ugas, the Suldans, the Sheikhs, and there were agreements that regulated the relationships among these groups, for instance the city of Afgooye was held by a non-belligerent pact signed by all clans, an agreement that was respected until the end of the '90s! (14:6).<sup>162</sup>

### *Remembered Tolerance*

My interviewees also insist that the post-independence Somalia up until the early Siad Barre period was a time of greater tolerance—including on matters of sex and gay rights. Guuleed recalls this as follows: “You see, once, where I used to live in Somalia, there were some male homosexuals [in the neighbourhood]; they would call out to one another down the street. They loved each other, nobody actually paid attention to it or cared about it; nobody actually condemned it [and] nobody hated them [for being gay]” (10:79). A vivid memory that is confirmed by this other account from Cilmi (14:80) “Back in my days there were gay couples, in Merca, the town of my mother, there were gay couples and even marriages. For sure now you won’t see them around. I wonder how a society like ours could have gone backwards like this: what have we done to this country?”<sup>163</sup>

Even as they recall these times, the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora I interviewed cast them up against the perception that these social dimensions—sexual licence, sexuality and homosexuality especially—are taboo in Somali society. Yet there is a paradox in that if they were once not taboo the basis of the taboo today remains unspoken. Nevertheless, they assert that these social dimensions are entirely Western, or as impossible to transplant from the West to the Somali context because they conflict with the local tradition.

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<sup>162</sup> As explained by Lewis (2002: 9) “Clans are traditionally led by Sultans (in Somali: *Sultan, Boqar, Garad, Ugas*, etc.)

<sup>163</sup> Two important witnesses of the Somalia of those years indirectly touch upon the issue while talking about Mogadishu in their books. Cappelli (2011: 83) defines it as “*la città favorevole ai piaceri*” [“the town inclined to pleasures”], while Petrucci (1993a: 31) writes of those “*stregati da Mogadiscio*” [“bewitched by Mogadishu”] and “*le libere donne di Mogadiscio*” [“the free women of Mogadishu”]. Self-evidently, the authors are referring to behaviours, customs, and habits that back then were tolerated, at least in the urban centres, and with the complicity of a certain neo-colonial exploitative mentality.

## *Remembered Women's Freedom*

Most of the women in my sample are nostalgic for the post-independence phase, up until the 1969–75 period, if not later. They miss the “time of hope”, a period when—despite all the downsides and shortcomings—they recall having wider margins of freedom. Of course, I am talking about a particular group of people, the members of an elite. Often from urban contexts, and educated (at least up to a certain level), these women are also bearers of the much-discussed social change capital. Undeniably, during those years, and especially during the Siad Barre’s rule, the condition of the woman was promoted and not only in the proclamations of the regime. Women could access ministerial positions albeit not real political decision makers (Ingiriis & Hoehne 2013). Their contribution to the Somali project was ideally valued on equal terms as that of men. Women accessed education more than they had in the past (Grassivaro 1985).<sup>164</sup> The Scientific Socialism propaganda machine produced several publications (in various languages) to highlight, especially to an international audience, the revolutionary role of women.<sup>165</sup> In 1974, with the input of the *barbette* and the civilian government, a new family law was adopted.<sup>166</sup> It introduced, among other things, the possibility for women to petition for divorce and raised their share quota in the succession of family properties. It was a real revolution in the face of Shari’ah, the Somali tradition, and the Islamic precepts more generally (Abdhullahi 2010).<sup>167</sup> Women started to work and thus to have a social role and profile beyond the home. Sometimes they ran businesses and factories. Even their traditional role in managing the family—which many recall as under the shadow of rather arrogant and ineffectual menfolk—started to be acknowledged as important even in a nomadic context.

Below I present the recollections and statement of the women in my sample as they remember this period in time. Mentioning the prevailing dress code, Beydaan recalls: “When I was a girl I used

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<sup>164</sup> Based on Grassivaro (1985), in the period 1981-1984 the female population of the Somali National University was about a 12.5% of the total (in average).

<sup>165</sup> Among them: Ministry of Information and National Guidance, (1974c) *The Role of our Socialist Women: An active Role in Nation-Building*; Political Bureau of the Presidency of the Somali Revolutionary Council, Female Section, (1975) *La Femme Somalienne et la Construction Socialiste*.

<sup>166</sup> The new Family Law entered into force on 11 January 1975, and was published on the Official Gazette no. 1, Vol. 3, of 8 March 1975. The new legal provisions, which were officially described as being ‘based on the Muslim religion and specifically on the School (Madhab) of Imam Shafi’ amended the marriage, polygamy, divorce, heritage and children’s guardianship laws to place men and women on a more equal footing (Political Bureau of the Presidency of the Somali Revolutionary Council, Female Section, 1975: 17-end).

<sup>167</sup> Many perceived this as the turning point in the regime of Siad Barre given these provisions were too modern to be accommodated without criticism or discontent among the Somali society. As Abdhullahi (2010: 152) writes: “its impact within the wider context of Islamic revival in Somalia would prove crucial”.

to play basketball, to wear shorts. I did not wear the veil; all this has changed in the last 20 years” (3:50). She adds, “My mother used to dress up in the Somali traditional way, not in the Muslim fashion” (3:45) and that:

I used to go to the Quranic school in the morning, and the public one in the afternoon. I used to read the Quran, to fast during Ramadan, to run—in shorts of course—and go to the cinema and to the theatre. I also had a boyfriend whom I took home sometimes. My father did not have a problem with this; the same applied in rural areas. Back then, on a Thursday night or a Friday, we used to go to the disco, in the middle of nowhere, there was civilisation also in the countryside; youngsters were free to live as they wished. Often, for instance, before they returned to their own homes [the next morning] male partners or boyfriends were allowed to stay over and would sleep in the nanny’s quarters (3:79).

Sagal reiterates this point, noting, “When I was young I never wore the veil. I used to dress modestly, but now I have to [wear a veil] if I go back to Somalia. Also the young girls living in the country have to, but why?” (5:23). Ayaan is even more approving of the old civic rules: “before the outbreak of the civil war and the overflowing of the Islamic fundamentalism, we Somali women had gained substantial social change in our favour, now women’s rights have regressed though [but] with Siad Barre the condition of woman improved a lot; he gave us a lot” (17:3; 17:52). I received many similar sentiments during interviews:

Once the Somali women were free in Somalia (17:186)

I always went around wearing my trousers! (17:139)

Once I could dress the way I wanted. Now when I go to London I have to wear a *foulard*, [and] they label me as *gaal*. The point is that I always said the truth [and] even my grandfather, who was a nomad, respected us [making] these types of choices (24:17).

Once women used to work, now I hear certain stories (24:23).

I wish the freedom of that time [would return] (25:11).

Once women were free to marry whom they wanted [...] we went to school together, male and female (25:13).

At the time of Siad Barre, we were all equal (25:92).

At the time of Siad Barre, women used to dress as I still do [in the traditional way] (26:21).

Siad Barre clearly emerges thus as a recurring reference. The pitfalls of his regime, and the cruelties of his totalitarian state, appear not to cloud or intrude on the general appreciation among my female Italoophone Somali interlocutors for his policies concerning women. From a privileged observation point, Aaden, who back then used to work in the education sector, makes the point in this way:

Somalia has always been a vanguard in the progression of the condition of women. In Somalia, there were the first feminist movements, and with Siad Barre women became ministers; they sat in the parliament. Somali women made a great contribution to the development of Somalia (22:61).

### *A Lost Somali State Remembered*

Above all other strands in their memories, the strength they recall for the Somali State during the early stages of the second Somali revolution (Scientific Socialism) stands out. For my interlocutors, this was a time when “inclusive citizenship” (Elmi 2016) was taken seriously and the state was—and was seen as—a functioning entity for the good of the nation, not just an uncomfortable neo-colonial and thus alien interposition on the local political tradition. The Italoophone Somali diasporans recall this as a new development in Somalia at the time, given the country had traditionally been regulated by (divisive) clan politics. Today, the notion of “inclusive citizenship” and the strong state appears to have ebbed entirely away. Yet back then, it managed to convince those who were recruited to the project to implement it—either as civil servants or military officers, teachers, students, professors, judges, entrepreneurs, and national and urban planners. As discussed above, *memories* as a dimension of the social change capital accumulated by my interlocutors function as a *benchmark* or a *point of reference* to contrast an unhappy present with a nobler past. In this case, it is a benchmark that contrasts the “failed” and “fractured” Somali state of today with the progressive and forward-looking one of back then. In the institutional void or weakness of (almost) three decades of Somali history since, this now-departed Somali state still represents a peak in the memory of many Italoophone Somali diasporans.

Not merely a psychological anchor, the ‘old’ Somali state is also a model for what institution- and state-building should proceed looking forward into the future. Cumar, a permanent diaspora member, puts it as follows: “to me, there is no other option—we have to follow the course embraced by the old administrations, those of Siad Barre and of the civilian governments” (1:26). The opinion of Maxamed, a returnee, is also quite striking: “there is no doubt that every Somali citizen in the diaspora would like to see the country of once upon the time” (15:3). He adds, “You know, I was

sentenced to death by the regime, and I could not return to my country anymore, but I would prefer that to what we have today” (15:52).

This is a sentiment shared by many women interlocutors, most likely as the recollection of the strong state chimes with their sense that the regime protected or advanced their interests back then as mentioned above. They long after what the country used to be, not only in terms of lost or compromised freedom, but also as a working, functioning entity. As Uba puts it “after so many years, and you know I’m [in my late 50s] now, my dream would be to go back and find the country that used to be—a free country, open to differences. Of course it was a military regime, but it was not as chaotic as it is today” (24:5). “Back then”, she continues, “there was prosperity, you could easily find flour, eggs, butter, and everything you needed in a patisserie” (24:22).

This type of reasoning or ex-post “romanticization” of the conditions prevailing in past dictatorships is noted in the literature and is reiterated here by Hindia, who says, “Siad Barre was a dictator but there were hospitals, free schools, and roads, and wrongdoers went to prison” (11:8). Similarly, Caaisho notes “With the help of God, because I’m religious too, we will go back to the Siad Barre era, when there were no fights, no killings [and] there were streets, shops, employment, the university, international agencies” (26:6). Jamilah makes the observation this way, saying “all those who have lived in that period long for [a return to] it, even the youngsters who were born later can hardly believe that Somalia used to be like that [...]. And I see it on Facebook, the various posts; they all talk [approvingly] about the past; they bless Siad Barre. Now they realize what he actually did” (25:14).

This mythologized past where “things worked properly” (most likely a distorted memory), is linked to a certain diffused cult and revival worship for “the Old Man”, Siad Barre. It is a diehard sentiment that the years of the civil war and of the subsequent complete failure of the Somali State have contributed to re-instil and trigger again in the Somali diaspora. Of course, in this respect, many distinctions are necessary, based on power proximity back then, clan affiliation and geographical area of provenance in the first place. Many Somali are rightly outraged by the very thought of “the Old Man”. However, as I have shown, the first years of the revolution managed to win the hearts and minds of a certain class of people, those participating in the modernization project of the country. The consciousness of clan belonging actually lessened or was sidelined altogether during the windows of those first years. There was a common project and goal at stake, other variables gained more importance over the clan, although ephemerally.

## A Strategy of “Mass” Social Change

The members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora have their own idea and understanding of social change. Consciously or unconsciously, they enact a sort of theory, where of course their role as agents of change is determinant. They are the enablers of this process. They are the engine of a whole series of reforms that the Somali society so desperately need and long for, for so many years. As I have shown in the previous sections, they are well equipped for the purpose. This is what I have called their social change capital, which is a combination of background, education, diasporic experience, social, religious and cultural capital (gathered all along the way), self-esteem, and memories. This knowledge and expertise is coupled with a certain outlook, a certain way of seeing, of looking at the Western world and development there as an example in many regards. Yet, behind a dominant modernization posture which revolves mainly around technology and the economic sphere, their approach is much more selective when it comes to other aspects of the social, political, and cultural spheres.

As described above, the process or remittance—namely of social remittance—occurs over time rather than space. For many, the memory of the peak that the Somali state and civil society reached during the first years of the Scientific Socialism remains unrivalled. Those years, maybe for the first time in many decades of dependency and colonialism, were perceived essentially and basically as purely Somali, notwithstanding all the transplants of the political programme. The government’s agenda was supposed to be genuinely and syncretely national and international, traditional and modern at the same time.<sup>168</sup> That experience, for good or bad, remains a benchmark for the Italoophone Somali diaspora, proof of what the Somali people can achieve in a modern state-centred world. During those years many political, military, and cultural influences flirted with the regime (from the West, Italy, United Kingdom, the USSR; from the then-eastern bloc the German Democratic Republic, Yugoslavia, and North Korea; from Africa, the Central African Republic, Guinea, Tanzania, and Uganda; and in general the Middle East, the Arab League, etc.). But, maybe with the sole exception of Italy,<sup>169</sup> they were justified, from a Somali perspective, more by an indiscriminate need

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<sup>168</sup> For an (albeit propagandistically biased) overview of the policies enacted during those years, see for instance: *Two Years of Progress, Somalia Under the Revolution (1969–1970)*, and *Somalia’s Socialist Revolutionary Construction 1969–1973*, both from the Ministry of Information and National Guidance (1971, 1973).

<sup>169</sup> The extent and duration (across a century, from 1892 to 1991) of the political, economic, and cultural bonds with Italy—as expressed through colonial and neo-colonial power in Puntland and South-Central Somalia—underpin this long-held notion of a “special relationship” [*relazione speciale* in Italian] between the two countries.

of political, economic, and technical “assistance”, rather than a well designed and consistent system of international relations. The revolution was meant to free Somalia from the leftovers and the shackles of colonialism. It was meant to be for and by the Somali people.

It is against this backdrop that the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora advance their hypothesis of elite-led social change. The overall theory behind their reasoning, including tacit assumptions, can be sketched as follows. Having accumulated social change capital, and having they seen how things actually work in the world, they just need to return to Somalia. By virtue of their presence—or more precisely the presence of them and their values, skills, and know-how—Somali society would progress, since modernization theories assume such values and capacities can be readily “diffused” in situ (Lerner 1958, Schramm 1964, Rogers 2003). Enriched by this contribution, social change would be expected to occur almost “naturally” according to my interlocutors. Somali diaspora members claim to have two main resources at their disposal for making change possible. The first is their own presence per se, and hence the spontaneous ‘transfusion’ this would entail: the osmotic transfer of knowledge, practices, and savoir-faire. On the other hand, they possess education, and are thus able to engage with the formal and informal education sectors, which encompasses all possible (subtle) teachings and civic preachings.

For the process to advance smoothly, though, Somali diaspora members need to adopt a certain strategy: change can only occur at a certain pace and by adopting a very low profile. The institutions and mechanisms of social control that I have discussed in the previous chapters pose great challenges. While I will address the role assigned to education in a separate chapter, in the remaining sections of this chapter I outline in greater detail the elements of the Italoophone Somali diasporans’ theory of social change. It bears noting that the outline of this theory is derived inductively from extensive interviews and discussions undertaken with a discrete set of Italoophone Somali diasporans but role they ascribe for themselves within the schema is nevertheless projected on the Somali diaspora as a whole.

### *Return En Masse*

Based on interviews and extensive discussions with my interlocutors, return *en masse* is the *conditio sine qua non* for the process of social change to begin. It can thus be thought of as the *primary enabling condition*. Numbers—a critical mass—is essential in this recounting because Somali society desperately needs a large transfusion of “good”, “well prepared and well-mannered”, “expert” people. Quality is

important, but quantity matters because it can shift the balance of the society in favour of the elite over those “left behind”. This is strikingly evident in the words of the representatives of the Italoophone Somali diaspora, in their implicit assumptions behind social change:

All those from the diaspora should return [since so many] have studied, have been urbanized (1:21; 2:46).

We have many educated people [living] abroad; even if just their children who have been educated abroad were to return [this would be enough] (2:33).

If the Somali diaspora would only return [*en masse*] to Somalia, even for a short period of time, the possibility of changing the country would become very real (3:24).

Many of us, we believe that our return *en masse* could dramatically change many things, in terms of work, ideas, civilisation (3:73).

Some propose as well an equal distribution over the territory:

If I go back to the northeast, someone [else] to the South, and [yet another] to the centre, and we start to build “from the bottom” [stated in English] then something can improve (5:57).

These are but a handful of examples. Returnees—those who already reside in Somalia—also see this potential from within the country. As Hani puts it: “There are many people now that are coming back, that I knew from before, from school and university; we should combine all these resources [...]. There are so many intelligent people that have seen how life is elsewhere, who bring us so many ideas” (30:26; 30:32).

“Presence” is a central theme here, with return *en masse* providing a new cadre of unofficial civil servants, teachers, and educators to disseminate (and model) “best practices”. It thus reflects very much a vision of replicating the old “Ololaha campaign”—a mass campaign for literacy and alphabetization that was launched in 1974–75. Not for nothing, then, is education held as the solution, the sector upon which to focus and allocate the lion’s share of resources and energy. Beydaan expresses this without any hesitation, saying: “Concerning education, we need to do what Siad Barre did” (3:77). Barre, a permanent diaspora member, is just as unequivocal: “The school system needs

those of us who have lived abroad, in the diaspora [...]. If I could, I would open up some schools, where students would receive technical-vocational training (4:21, 4:23).

Within the narrative of mass return, any forms of teaching seems to appeal to the Italoophone Somali diaspora. Their social change capital is in fact defined, in the first place, by their education and background. In educational terms they can usually claim—not always accurately, it has to be said—a strong competitive advantage in comparison with the Somalis back home. No surprise that, at the level of the Somali diaspora in general, along with public school experiments here and there, many people tend to financially contribute to, if not directly set up, their own school establishments.<sup>170</sup> I will take this theme up in greater detail in the final chapter on education as the concluding theme of social change.

#### *Unpacking the Vision of Change: Characteristics and Priorities*

Change can be understood in different ways and orders of priority. As noted above, the Italoophone Somali diaspora see the attenuation of tradition, clannism, and the new dominant interpretation of Islam as central. In other words, change could be exemplified by the advent of a strong and reliable state apparatus, the neutralization of clannism (not of the clan), the improvement of the condition of women, or the advent of a new (old) liberal interpretation of Islam. Most of my interviewees seem to live in a transnational and transtemporal place, at the border between tradition and (their experience of) progress. They see themselves as carrying a torch of sorts—they have “seen how things work”, they have witnessed the “good old days”, and they have the “right background”—that can light the way to some future. Their vision strives for a compromise across cultures, the questionable and the unquestionable, the present and the past, heresy and orthodoxy. This compromise results in an open or sometimes veiled invitation to revise certain precepts of Somali institutions, codes, and rules. As noted, this could include the system for compensation of damages (*diya*), certain traditional practices (dietary and gender issues, patriarchalism, or female genital mutilation), or the main tenets of the religious sphere.

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<sup>170</sup> These are often private and necessarily confessional. As discussed in Chapter 4, the number of confessional schools is mushrooming in Somalia (Eno et al. 2014, Saggiomo 2011, Cassanelli & Abdikadir 2008).

### *Low Profile, Trust, Gradualism, Awareness, and Rationality*

The adoption of a low profile is a central theme that emerges in the interviews with the Italo-phone Somali diaspora as it pertains to how they would propose to action in practice to bring about social change. Chapter 4 laid out counteracting strategies that have been devised in order to cope with the various forms of sanction. Here I focus more on the positive aspects of this same approach—as undertaken action—which are meant to spark a process of (social) change. The main goal is always to prevent the triggering of those sanctions. Diaspora members cannot afford in fact to “wake up” the power of radical Islam, clannism, or the Tradition (with a capital “T”), and draw their strict attention upon their (mis)conduct. It would burden, hinder, or prevent all together any process of change.<sup>171</sup> Keeping a low profile represents a possible way to go.

Beydaan describes this point quite clearly as follows:

If I want to work with them [those “left behind”], I have to look like them. If I’m to go to Somalia to bring a new message I have to reconsider my approach, otherwise they [can] immediately spot the difference, and they label me immediately as Westernized; there is a total, immediate refusal [to listen or engage] (3:12).

Sagal points out that in an era of social media, “what was said this morning in Toronto is discussed this same day in Garowe; you have to pay attention to what you say, not to expose yourself” (5:34). She is echoed by Cilmi, who says: “If you foolishly expose yourself, you are immediately out [...]; where there are quite clear rules, such as the use of the veil and the prohibition of the use of trousers, you cannot seek confrontation openly, you are immediately finished” (14:76; 14:77).

Potential diaspora agents have to gain people’s trust and approval, and a minimum of social legitimacy if they are to attempt the hazardous task of bringing about change. This holds true in the traditional, as well the clanic and the religious realms. Somehow, they have to accept the status quo, without openly questioning it. Diaspora representatives’ compliance with the locally dominant set of values and powers is in fact prejudicially questioned by those “left behind” (as confirmed by Hammond 2015). The former have been potentially exposed to a source of corruption, notably the

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<sup>171</sup> Social change has to be understood here as the process inspired by—and seeking to bring about—a concrete set of social and individual values. Italo-phone Somali diaspora members consider the most salient of these to be freedom, tolerance, diversity, independence, and self-reliance. I will address them more in details in a dedicated section, in the final chapter.

Western world, as it is often sadly reported. Hence, as Xabiib says, it takes “time to make yourself believed that the world has gone ahead, and that there are many other possibilities, many other ways” (18:20). Social change cannot take place abruptly, it does not occur overnight. They all agree on the need for “gradualism”: “You cannot skip some stages, the process requires time” (5:24), also because “many people are old, they have their own mentality” (4:22). It is maybe worth to starting with “a few things, little by little”.

In a society deeply affected by the absence of trust and disrupted social texture, promoting social change is not just a matter of goals, but how they are conveyed. The agents of change face this very challenge. It is not just about the content of the message, but how this message gets across and is perceived as deviant from a certain tradition. Change can only occur at a certain pace and from within the country. For this to happen the agents of change have to be perceived as “true Somalis”, as bearers of “true Somali values”, including the new tradition in vogue. Only then, having been accepted as insiders (i.e. as not corrupted, or too Westernized by their experiences abroad), can they have a say and instil change, resorting to their key resources (i.e. the social change capital they have accumulated).

Social change requires (self-) awareness as well, which again takes time to acquire and instil. Gurey comments on this as follows: “[M]ost of us that are in the field, we know how to behave, how to act. We cannot intervene from a legal perspective, we have to create awareness, we have to invest in civic education, and we cannot straightaway stigmatize the harmful practices of religion” (8:22). Most of the Italoophone Somali diaspora agree on this point. Hodan states quite unequivocally the need for a process of change from within, “if you are to change the mentality of the people, you need an organization that is based in Somalia” (11:32). Aaden instead speaks about the level of awareness and discernment that in turn the potential agent of change needs:

You need to learn how to work for the society, based on what they [the people] know, what the main constituents of the social contract that keeps that society together are, starting from the village, the district, the governorate, up to the central government. You have to investigate; you have to get close to that reality (22:73).

Knowledge of, respect for, and proximity to the context are the ingredients of any strategy whatsoever.<sup>172</sup> Once more, the religious realm and the forms of mass control that are linked to the

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<sup>172</sup> A corollary of this general attitude is also the general discredit in which international organisations and missions are held in Somalia.

current dominant interpretation of Islam seem to be the main reasons of concern among the Italoophone Somali diaspora members. As discussed in Chapter 5, what my interlocutors refer to as “the masses” are often paternalistically considered to be easily victims of their own good faith and naivety. Gurey is quite trenchant about this, claiming, “You just need to tell the people not to do this or that, because the Quran says it; these people do not go any further [in their approach to moral reflection]” (8:22). He continues:

The religious chiefs of the old school, those who have a more superficial and literal knowledge of the Quran, they should not be employed any longer, now there are so many youngsters that have studied better and more in depth, at the university [...]. They are the ones that can preach the giving up of certain practices and taboos, with religious explanations, saying that this and that does not correspond to religious dictates (8:22).

Against this backdrop, the use of rationality and interpretation skills seems to be key resources for approaching the religious code, the core of the Italoophone Somali diaspora’s strategy. The process needs to start from what the Somalis are, with their current traditions and institutions. Only by starting from there, the possibility of a debate, of an open discussion, for how narrow and challenging it can be, might be given. Issues cannot be addressed openly, out front. As Cilmi puts it

There is the possibility of dialogue, even though now it has been cancelled by the religion or other influences. If we start [to rebuild the social fabric] again from the clan, which is who we are [at our core], this gives us the opportunity to access each other [...] to dialogue with everybody (14:24).

The “gates of rationality”, as some of my interviewees put it, are thus not completely sealed. A change strategy has to start from there. “Let’s make the person [...] self-aware” in order to be able to work on logic, reason, and rationality. Cilmi, again, comments in this way such an approach:

[T]he biggest closure is the one against logic. We have to pass through these gates, we cannot touch religion, the religious subject, social change can only occur in this way; through the means of logic and rationality, youngsters feel like learning actually (14:77).

For many of my interviewees the main “battle” is fought on this field—namely, on the religious pitch. And it is here that those appeals to rationality and logic are more frequently put forward. They work as an invitation to review the interpretation of the religious dictate, to individually assess reputed

interpreters' views, soften radicalism, make the people more aware, avoid manipulations and misinterpretations, and advocate for a sense of responsibility: of the interpreters towards the masses, of the individuals towards themselves and their neighbours.

I will thoroughly discuss rationality, as a resource and as a message, in the next Chapter, on Communication for Social Change. I refer instead to the section on social change capital (within this chapter) for further details on the role that the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora assign to interpretation as part of their religious capital. As I put it forward there, it works as a key concept and resource per se: as a way out of the impasse, as a way out of radicalism and fanaticism.

## Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the social change capital accumulated by the Italoophone Somali diaspora members comprises, *memories* and the faculty to remit these over time (to be discussed in further detail), coupled with the “enlightenment” associated with the diasporic experience, and the other forms of capital understood in a Bordiuesian sense—cultural, religious and social—derived from them. At the individual level, these five components or dimensions are reconciled in a new hybrid identity, where tradition and *Somaliness* are bridged with acquired technical-scientific skills and modernization ideals. It is a sort of transnational and transtemporal mix of qualities, attitudes, understandings, where (post-colonial) education, a certain imprinting, and a form of nostalgia for the good old times play a pivotal role. In some cases, the background—or more specifically the role played by memories—can be more preponderant, in some other cases the social capital and the (professional) experience acquired in the West come to the fore. In any case, this potentiality, my interviewees claim, is only activated through the diasporic experience as a rite of passage. The members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora look at themselves as the true (exclusive?) bearers of this renewed capital, which would make Somalia eventually progress. A return *en masse* from the diaspora, they theorise, would eventually spark such a process.

Within this context, social change can be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand, as a projection of the ‘traditional’ level of control exercised (or perhaps merely idealized) by the Somali institutions in the “good old days”. Against this backdrop, memories are instrumental in the ongoing process of social remittance: they work as a source of inspiration and a term of reference for deeming what is desirable and feasible, if not attainable. On the other hand, social change can be appreciated as a

change in the level of self-reliance and individual discernment. It concerns the “inner world” of the Somali, as defined for the purposes of this study in Chapter 6. As such, it is perceived as a challenge by a society with high level of communalism, peers control, religious orthodoxy, and clannism.

The battle raging in Somalia today, from an Italoophone Somali diaspora perspective, is also the competition between these two principles: liberalism and communitarianism, individualism and collectivism.<sup>173</sup> On the one hand individual freedom and rationality, in the liberal tradition, on the other hand, collective bonds and protection guaranteed by full adherence to the communal ethics and ethos. The Italoophone Somali diaspora members are at the crossroads of these opposing principles.

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<sup>173</sup> Steiner (2001: 201), already in 1998, speaks about “the growing antagonism between collectivity and individualism in Somali society”.

## Chapter 9

# Development Discourse: Communication as a Vector of Social Change

Not all diaspora members engage with their home country, of course, but many do experience “a very strong sense of societal responsibility” (Horst 2017: 1351). Among the Italoophone Somali diaspora sub-group, those who decide to “take action” do so in ways that vary. However, while not all do in fact choose to “take action” all lay a claim in some form to the capacity to do so, as I have shown in the previous chapter. “We all have a project on the shelf” some of them acknowledge. For others, they refer to projects of action cynically—as “systematically bound to fail or to derail”—but nonetheless hinting at somehow being important for their people back home. Their agency when linked with the dominant forms of social control—the forces in the structure, and in combination with desires and capabilities, to cite van Houte’s framework (2016), as laid out in Chapter 2—produce a range of completely different outputs and behaviours.<sup>174</sup>

However, there is another set of variables that plays a pivotal role here—namely, their propensity to assume risks, their security sensitiveness and, in some cases, their fatalism. These variables are crucial factors in explaining Italoophone Somali diasporans’ behaviour, and the extent to which they expect retaliation or sanction for actions taken or opinions expressed. The same variables are at play both in the diaspora and in the interactions with their counterparts directly in Somalia.

As a matter of fact most Italoophone Somali diaspora members are in one way or another unconsciously or intuitively engaged in a form of development communication or communication for social change, in spite of the prevailing fear and threat of sanctions, diffused conformism and compliance, taboos and self-censorship laid out in Chapter 7. There are three levels to be distinguished: 1) the level of professional practice—those who are Development Communicators by profession—which counts very few among the Somali diasporans who regularly retain links with the home country; 2) the level of public institutions, which is linked to their professional profile in the field and; 3) the private level, as ordinary citizens in their interpersonal and unofficial interactions and

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<sup>174</sup> See the distinction between *agency* and *structure* as discussed by van Houte (2016) in her working paper, and the circular relationship between *agency*, *structure*, *desire*, and *capacity*.

their purposeful engagements and communication flows with networks of contacts (family members, friends, and acquaintances) in the field.<sup>175</sup> It is at the two latter levels—2) and 3)—that the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora are much more active in bringing about change, or easing it. At these levels, they also avoid the general discredit that is often associated in Somalia to (international development aid).

## **The Educational Sectors and the Role of “Teachers”**

Leaving aside those who do not take the step between agency and action, the Italoophone Somali diasporan elites who do tend to engage in four main areas of socio-cultural or economic activity: 1) education; 2) women’s empowerment; 3) health, and; 4) business sector, with some overlapping of course.

Education is the most popular sector among my sample. This is true in the direct sense of those working to improve institutional education and in the transversal sense that as ‘educated’ elites they feel qualified with something to ‘teach’ others. It is not surprising that as offspring of a distinct cultural background, my interlocutors tend to see their comparative advantage in terms of cultural capital as something they wish to “sell back”. Of course, this is an option that guarantees status and recognition (sometimes only from abroad), and maybe an employment opportunity (Hammond 2015). What I also noticed during the fieldwork is that the informal nature of the education sector in Somalia today, coupled with a distinct self-confidence and general impatience to “get results” among my interlocutors, sees some of them willing to “cut corners”. They set themselves up as coaches and consultants in the sector, without having developed the requisite experience or, indeed, the necessary qualifications. Most of those who have been abroad, as I have shown in the previous chapter, feel well-qualified to teach, to open people’s eyes and to “cure” what they often very disparagingly refer to as the “ignorant masses”. And, as already stressed, that diasporic background—of leaving the home country, voyaging towards a remote destination, and surviving in a competitive and uncertain ‘developed’ world—all contribute as qualifying experiences. There is a presumed shift that occurs right there, in the uncertain “developed” world, in terms of social-cultural capital and prestige that is attributed and self-claimed. From this vantage point, then, the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora gain a power position, which they try to put to use to effect change.

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<sup>175</sup> I add this private dimension to those put forward in the literature (Enghel 2015), as discussed in Chapter 2.

If all Italoophone Somali diaspora members are purportedly in a position to teach, physicians are naturally attracted by the health sector, whereas women are concerned with higher levels of gender equality, more in line with their own experiences abroad. These two sectors reflect a sort of gender divide, a partition that is quite hard to overcome. Almost exclusively only men work as doctors in the health sector, whereas women, irrespective of their formal qualifications and training, usually tend to engage with other women and gender issues. Most probably, this is the result of a personal preferences, different levels of cultural capital, and the impact of the institutions and mechanisms of social control. In other words, men—as the core of the urban elite in the early days as laid out in Chapter 4—were most able to access secondary and university education, at home but also abroad. Within this framework, physicians proved to be among one of the most requested professions, as is still often the case in developing countries.<sup>176</sup> In addition, physicians are now going back to Somalia (“with certificates and degrees”) in good numbers to set up private clinics or to work in the rather emaciated public health systems. Of course, there are exceptions. There are also women working as health care staff, but they are a rarity among the Italoophone Somali diaspora, as far as I could understand from my interviewees. More likely, women tend, when they decide to, to engage in the empowerment of other women. No particular certification is needed for this, and it is arguably more feasible, socially and culturally speaking.

Beyond these cases of professional engagement, Italoophone Somali diaspora members seem to prefer entrepreneurship—be it import/export, investment in local resource extraction, farming, or non-migratory herding, among others. In the following sections, I will address these sectors in more detail. For them all a same pattern applies. Those taking action act like a class of teachers, of missionaries, as if they were campaigning again (i.e. as they did in or just remember from the Ololaha campaign of 1974–75), or offered again their services to the nation.<sup>177</sup>

### *Men in the “Education” Sector*

Men among my interviewees seem to prefer to enter the education sector. Often perceived as intellectuals, they usually do not directly engage with politics, which requires moral and material

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<sup>176</sup> As Grassivaro confirms (1985), also at university level, in the period 1981–84 at the SNU, “the most coveted course of studies [were] Medicine, Languages, Economics, Engineering and Agricultural Sciences” in this order.

<sup>177</sup> During the military regime, Somali youth was supposed to spend one year in the National Civil Service and a semester in the Military and National Guidance Service (Grassivaro 1985).

compromise, and exposures them to higher levels of risk.<sup>178</sup> Education is where they try their professional luck, seek out investments and practice financial and social remittances. Finally, this the sector to which they feel they can “give back” whatever they have learned in “the good old days” or while living and working abroad. Basically, it represents a clear and relatively point of entry for those seeking to give effect to the “mission” they feel called to practice. In addition, as noted above, it is a way to support personal independence and self-standing as human and rational beings. As Daahir, a permanent diaspora member in his early 50s with a PhD degree gained in Italy, puts it “I engage only for the improvement of the education sector in Somalia. When you are educated, you can dialogue with your neighbour, but if you are not, you are manipulable, otherwise Al-Shabaab and poverty would not be there” (12:68). Guuleed, also based in Italy and also with a PhD degree, is of the same opinion: “The sole sector I’m seriously thinking of is education, this area attracts me a lot” (10:115). Diric, a young Somali diasporan based in Florence, makes a similar point, noting “I would like to study, to learn how to communicate, so as to tell the truth, the truth to the people” (13:8).

Many are planning or just conjecturing about starting a school. “My plan would be to open a school in Mogadishu, where IT and Somali culture would be taught” says Cilmi (14:19), a Somali in his mid-50s, with a university degree gained in Italy. Others envisage “re-opening technical professional schools” in Somalia, in collaboration with the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, because “education is an extremely important sector” as Ayaan likes to stress. Others, especially returnees, are very directly engaged in the public university sector in Somalia, working at re-launching the Somali National University, or other regional universities in Puntland and South–Central Somalia. In some cases, they promote discussion and debates through other means, such as think tanks and the like. In one way or another, they promote education as a learning experience meant to reduce the gap with the locals, which was deepened by the diasporic experience on the one hand, and the annihilation caused by the civil war on the other.

My interlocutors have a broad understanding of the scope of the education sector. In their view, it comprises formal education, health education, religious education, cultural education, civic education, gender education and more generally the transfer of knowledge, practices and values. Education has to be understood here in this broadest sense, as a teaching activity on the one hand, and as a learning process on the other that will upgrade “the masses” to improved levels of self-

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<sup>178</sup> In the Somali context, being an intellectual means not only belonging to an educated elite, but also showing a marked engagement with the society and in the interest of the people (interviews with various key interlocutors).

awareness, self-reliance, and discernment. In other words, to something approximating the distinction that the Italo-phone Somali diaspora attributes to itself. All Italo-phone Somali diaspora members focusing on the education sector share this same rationale behind their choice. The formal sector is just one dimension here, since education is predominantly informal and confessional nowadays in Somalia (Eno et al. 2014, Saggiomo 2011, Cassanelli & Abdikadir 2008).

Confessional education must attract a certain number of diasporic engagements, although I could not register any example among my interviewees. Others sub-sectors include, for instance, the promotion of the Somali cultural heritage. Among my interviewees, some are working on preservation of the old medieval quarters of Mogadishu. Others strive instead to establish a public library, which is a rarity today in Somalia: a site of knowledge sharing, debate, and dissemination. In the best intentions of its proponents, a place ‘technically’ and ‘politically’ neutral, to be on the safe side, not to incur in the remonstrations, retaliations, or provocations of anybody, of any political, religious, or clan actor. Geddi, a Somali returnee to Benaadir with over 20 years of diasporic experience in Italy, heads some of these initiatives. He describes his commitment in this way:

I’m trying to carry out two projects at the moment, and both of them are ‘mission impossible’.  
The first one I care about is the setting up of a centre for the conservation of the historical heritage of [...]; the other initiative consists of creating the first district library in town [...].  
This library will focus on topics related to the ocean (fiction, techniques, sport, free time, etc.) because it is meant to raise the local Somalis’ interest in the ocean, as a resource for life and work (27:4; 27:5).

In his words, the aspiration to bring about change, and convey a certain message, has to come to terms with the current circumstances in Somalia, and the pervasive forms of social control there. Such initiatives could be sanctioned by the leading clan in the area, as not aligned with the clan agenda, by a radical religious group, as too Westernizing, or by the nomadic social fabric, as pernicious for the Somali tradition.

Those engaged in the health sector pursue another form of education. As noted, if they are physicians, they are usually keen on working in public or private clinics, while spreading, as mentors and teachers, knowledge gained or further developed abroad. It stems perhaps from the traditional Somali drive to “give back” (Hammond 2011), a resurfacing of their older collective ethos to act in the interests of the group. However, it is also a drive anchored in memories of the period in Somali history when education was free and accessible to all. I am suggesting that there is a link with the

educational culture of the immediate post-WWII period and with the years of Scientific Socialism. Maxamed, a physician in his 60s who has returned to Somalia after many years spent abroad including in Italy, explains “in a moment difficult as this one, for this people. I felt the compulsion to come and lend a hand, through a tool that is indispensable to me: public health” (15:6). He continues, “I set up a hospital, which is very useful in Somalia. People, when they are sick, scared, they are like babies [...]. I do a bit of everything—general practitioner, internal medicine [...]. I’m first and foremost specialized in gynecology” (15:21). He is not the only one I came across. For the reasons that I have recalled in the previous paragraph, many qualified members of the Italophone Somali diaspora happen to have a training as physicians. Before the opening up of the Scuola Medica, many were sent to study in Italy, on scholarships, and then starting from the early 1970s to Mogadishu, directly at the SNU.<sup>179</sup> Building upon those experiences, others further developed their competences abroad. They are either now directly engaging back in Somalia from within the country, as returnees, or if this is not possible, from without.

A male-dominated sector, there are nevertheless some women involved in education. Caaisho, in her early 50s belongs to this small minority. She is a returnee with an MA in Mental Health who has settled back in Mogadishu for some years now. She recalls the great challenge she had to overcome in order to pursue her goals:

When I arrived, the government told me that there was once a hospital for crazy people [referring to the mentally ill]—built in 1938 by the Italians. But then it was destroyed, with no walls, nothing; maybe only two or three wards left [...] so I had to do it [re-establish the hospital] myself. I mean there is nobody helping you out, no government, no agency [...]. I had 120g in gold with me—necklaces, earrings, rings, etc [...]. I went to the market and sold the gold, to re-open the place. I am a doctor for mental diseases (26:3).

Other permanent members, irrespective of their qualifications as doctors, have shown a certain cognizance for the health sector. They have sent equipment (including ambulances) and medication. The proposed ways of addressing and improving the general health state of the Somalis can be quite diverse. Probably by virtue of an automatic and plausible association between the two sectors, quite

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<sup>179</sup> In the period 1971–84 (which includes a few years of activity of the Istituto Superiore, before the SNU was fully established), 360 graduated students in medicine, surpassing the number of any other programme. In the same period, the SNU issued 301 degrees in veterinary science, 241 in agricultural science, 233 in engineering, and 106 in chemistry (Grassivaro 1985).

often medical doctors, physicians and other health personnel hone in on sport, which is encouraged as a social activity and praised as a way to build peace as well. Taban, a permanent diaspora member and a physician based in Italy, puts it in this way: “I have tried with the sport to nurture peace, to help the boys to socialize”. Other returnees have set up their own football team, sometimes attaining a certain degree of success and popularity across Somalia.

## Reasoning is the Message

Asked about the way they try to bring about change, Italoophone Somali diaspora members seem to attribute particular attention to a main message while adopting their didactic approach: the importance of the faculty of reasoning, and the use of rationality, which subsume the values of non-violence and peace. While engaging with their apprentices in the education sector—be they actual students or patients, family members, or the casual local interlocutor—Italoophone Somali diaspora members convey certain messages, and inevitably practice a certain set of values. There are those who are involved in their professional capacity and those who engage as laypersons. These two dimensions being hardly separable, they overlap and coexist in almost every single profile.

Individual understandings of reasoning as a value differ. What is (reasonably) reasonable and what is not, admissible or not, licit or not, rational or irrational, may differ across the members of the group and can be stretched, almost, into opposite directions. Nevertheless, the core ideas and principles remain the same: “think with your own head”, take the time to reflect, to ponder, to put things in context, and do not allow yourself to be manipulated, mobilized, or driven by others. This is what I have recursively registered among the Italoophone Somali diaspora as the core message in whatever form of engagement or sub-sector they might be active in. This is the core of their background, the quintessence of their social change capital. As if they were a group of especially ‘enlightened’ people, they (re)turn to Somalia (Horst, 2017) with this mission.

Bilal gives a first account of this, while promoting free debate among his class of students, on various topics. He puts it in this way:

I engage in a free discussion with my students. I explain to them, using a term of endearment [he says *vezzeggiativo* in Italian] for themes that I reject within myself and then start the topic [...] and I ask: ‘what prevents me from going to cultivate our farms?’ First, you have to persuade the families, all those people that import [goods] instead of producing them [locally].

The discussion starts, and then you find out that there is a problem, but you cannot say this directly, [and it is] better if you approach the topic gingerly at first (7:34).

Free discussion, given its implications in a Somali context, is the value and the mission to be pursued *per se*. A free discussion is one where different opinions can coexist (see quote 9:44 by Amiin, as discussed in Chapter 10), where the other and the different is not simply tolerated but also accepted without putting anybody's life in danger. The following quote from Bilal is worth reproducing here in full:

This evening for instance, I'm going to meet with three other friends. We have an appointment [to meet] in a hotel. We have set up a think tank in Somalia, and we discuss among us various subjects. We already have a statute, objectives, [and] a headquarters. We are going to start with the education sector. This evening we start with that [question]: what is wrong with the Somali education? The next subject will be transparency, and so on. We don't want to do politics. We will have then to assign some titles to these discussions, and publicize them among the people, through TV, radio; we will open up some hotlines. The people will be able to express what they think, because asked about it, because asked for an opinion. This is our objective, to make a free discussion surface (7:46).

He continues by saying, "Now the people are afraid, all this cannot come out, but if you call them, they can, they can say whatever they want [...] I believe it will work". The members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora cherish this goal, they would like to see "the Masses" able to think for themselves, reason independently and, indeed, be reasonable. As noted, they take on a public role as "teachers"—a sort of "educational vanguard"—whose main goal is to bring about change. The same applies to education in a more formal meaning, as well as to religious education, or any other form of (traditional) knowledge transmission.

### *Reasoning Across Social Controls*

For each of the institutions and mechanisms of social control in the Somali society—tradition, clannism, and the new dominant interpretation of Islam—the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora offer an alternative (read: reasoned and reasonable, in their views) "version". They reiterate these alternatives consistently, promoting a shift from the current models to the projected

“reasonable” ones as an underlying objective. Such shifts, in their view, would involve the rational application of technical (often Western-derived) knowledge within the existing social order.

When health education is governed by tradition (Mauro 1994, Mansur 1980), physicians tend to put forward solutions offered by the modern medicine if deemed more effective. New compromises are suggested between a perennial space (Somalia) and a transient time (progress). Reason, here, demands that health issues are addressed in a way that is scientific and “modern”, something that my interlocutors argue has been lacking in the past, since such approaches have been seen as conflicting with traditional ways of practicing medicine, providing health care, or just nourishment. Maxamed puts this point as follows:

As a result of my professional experience, I have developed a particular [i.e. non-traditional in the Somali context] diet. [...] I practice integral nutrition [including ingredients considered *haram*] in my diet, which for them [his patients] is a shame. In other words, we have had a clash of views; but in the end, this diet has passed and has been accepted (15:27).

Gurey, another physician who lives in the Diaspora, concurs: “the main message I convey is that child and maternal health and nutrition is a survival and development priority” (8:57).

Both these professionals reflect the wider mission of their group to confront Somali Tradition “with a capital T”, either by counselling a shift in diet or the adoption of certain nutritional or health practices. They do so in full awareness that certain habits and practices have come to be deemed “traditional”—and thus immutable—and thus resort to patient reasoning to convince others to (at least attempt) compromise with alternative approaches, based on scientific knowledge. For these physicians, reasoning - while resorting to scientific erudition - means to underpin one’s own views with knowledge rather than belief, or a reasonable combination of the two. These seem to be the two opposing principles lying at the core of this clash of stances towards social change.

Concerning clannism for instance, physicians assert that they will happily treat anyone, irrespective of clan affiliations. Maxamed says “I cure and operate anybody, once I operated for three hours a governor of an opposing side of \*\*\*\*\*, whoever has an health issue calls me, whoever” (15:30). Taban who lives permanently outside Somalia, practices the same value or principle: health first, without distinctions. It would be unreasonable for him to do otherwise. He uses these words to convey this commitment: “If a wounded Ethiopian comes to me, I cure him without argument. There are more \*\*\*\*\* [name of a clan family] than \*\*\*\*\* [name of another clan family] coming to visit me

[for treatment]” (23:43).<sup>180</sup> Guuleed concurs, albeit from a mere religious perspective: “I try to make them reason, also those who have tribalism in their blood” (10:92). Nevertheless, his religious messaging is an attempt to transcend clannism:

Each Somali has his credo, which is represented by a clan and a religious faith. I try to find a way to convince them [the people he deals with] to transcend the clan, in order to reunite [the country] in the name of religion, which says ‘I created you different so you would learn to understand each other’. This is the message of the Quran. [...] I try to convince them that if we stick to tribalism we cannot progress much further (10:80).

Italophone Somali diaspora members expect reason to apply to the religious realm as well. To take action though, as actual communication for social change, and propose publicly a “rational alternative” risks the sanctions (including accusations of blasphemy and apostasy) laid out in detail in Chapters 6 and 7. “I strive for a reasoned and reasonable interpretation of the religious corpus”, says Guuleed (10:135), but he is the only one from whom I register the comment. Most Italophone Somali diaspora members probably prefer to remain silent about this. They do not express themselves openly nor take a public position. They do not openly engage as vectors of social change in this context.

### *Non-Violence as a Corollary*

Non-violence and peace values work as corollaries in this schema of reason and rationality. They entail the affirmation of the possibility of otherness. They are forms of respect for the other and his or her way of thinking. They represent a general attitude of disengagement towards violence and other undemocratic ways of settling disputes. Many returnees claim in fact to be advocating for peace and democratic values, respect for difference, and freedom of the human being. Absimil, a male returnee of retirement age based in Mogadishu, exemplifies this general outlook: “[I]he message I try to convey is always the same—peaceful coexistence with everybody, with all those different from us [...] to me these are universal values” (6:45). In a context often dominated by severe lack of security, terrorist attacks, and the religious administration of justice—including, in some areas, the death penalty for apostasy or the principle of “an eye for an eye”—advocating for non-violence is commonplace among my interviewees.

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<sup>180</sup> He mentions two different clans, one of which is his own. Ethiopians are, for the average Somali, historically, the greatest and fiercest “enemies”.

It encompasses, whenever possible, a certain propensity to promote dialogue and renewed invitations for reasoning. “I invite them [those “left behind”] to keep clear from violence, and to learn how to share something” as Amiin, a young man in his mid-thirties, a relative newcomer, based in Italy, puts it (9:43). Such a message—however subtle and tentatively advanced—is a clear defence of the human being, of human life. Aaden, a returnee based in Puntland and generally engaged in the education sector, be it formal or informal, inside or outside school establishments, lapidary describes his civic engagement (22:64) “I always try to defend the liberty of the human being”. The Italoophone Somali diaspora, especially the women, appear to cherish liberty, a term they reiterate repeatedly in our discussions, as the next sections will detail.

## **Women Empowering other Women**

Acting as ‘educators’ in the broad sense I have laid out here is definitely the leading approach adopted by the Italoophone Somali diaspora members in their civic engagements back home. As outlined, my interlocutors engage this way both professionally but also in their everyday lives, in any context be it family or social interaction where they (especially the men) feel they can “teach or coach” someone about tradition, clannism or religion. Women are no different, at least in terms of the underlying mentality (the social contexts, as we shall see, differ). If education and health are the preferred areas of engagement for men, women are more preoccupied with empowering other women. Yet they also taken on a role as “teachers” when advocating women’s rights. I present their engagements separately because they form a quite distinct and highly gendered space of action.

As mentioned, women enjoyed a higher degree of freedom and emancipation in the post-independent Somalia and even more so in the early Siad Barre’s period. Merryman (1996: 193) notes: “Although Barre’s regime fell short of its goal, the seeds of the idea of equality were planted—to sprout in the future in unpredictable ways”. Thus, the legacies of this period—still vivid in the memory—are clear for female Italoophone Somali diasporans, who look at it as a source of inspiration and resistance.

### *Alternative Ways of Dressing in Public are Possible*

Hence, in their public dimension, diaspora women are more interested in promoting women’s role in the society, and in raising their status back to pre-civil war levels. In this respect, the dress code is an

extremely powerful form of communication and resistance, now that veils, jilbabs, and burqas are so widespread. This expectation is to the Somali women participants in my study a regimented and monochromatic appearance, which is at odds with the more colourful Somali tradition (Aden 2017, Akou 2011, Ahmed 1999). Before and during the years of Scientific Socialism, the women in my study embraced this colourful dress in public as the norm. Today, they struggle to uphold this experience before other women, especially younger ones. Jamilah, who runs a business between Europe and Somalia, touches upon the issue and how she deals with it whenever she visits Somalia:

Me too, I cover myself; but I wear what pleases me. I want to be beautiful; I dress myself up like women at the time of Siad Barre, with the liberty that they used to have, and I do not want men or religion to determine how we have to dress. Even in the way we dress, we express some aspect of our liberty [...]. I want the women to understand this—namely, that they do not need to go around all dressed in the same way, as it pleases someone with a long beard [i.e. a religious scholar] [...]. I want those of my age to realize this, that we lived like that, that we were modernized! (25:28; 25:27):

Showing the possibility that another way of dressing is possible is the main preoccupation of Ayaan as well. She is politically engaged at local level and in the diaspora and expresses her firm beliefs this way: “I want to show the possibility that you can do that [dress as you wish]. If people see this possibility then some among them will gain courage, and realize that it is possible!” (17:171). For her, showing up unveiled or taking sides publicly on a political matter—a right traditionally reserved for men—can be very challenging, even more so if in front of a camera. However, she takes the risk. She recounts her experience in front of a diasporic audience in the United Kingdom, using these words:

If you don't cover your hair, and if you show yourself too Westernized, you are criticized—they tell you that you have abandoned the tradition [...] but if we don't defend our space of freedom ourselves, we risk losing it all. We have to go and represent a viable compromise [...]. They asked me to put on the veil, and again I said ‘no, absolutely not’; [I reiterated] that I didn't do that [not wear a veil] out of fear of something or someone, Al-Shabaab included. In Somalia, I never wore the veil; I was always free. If I put on the veil, I show and prove to everybody that we are all infected by this fear, from this Islamic fundamentalism. But I'm not a fanatic, and even less so am I inclined to do something to please someone else (17:164, 171)

She continues:

So I did my interview. Again, I was very much appreciated as a woman, as a strong woman, with the hair tied of course—well put together. Many women applauded, and I believe that, for them, and for their daughters I represented a model, an example to be followed. And nobody—in the comments to the video that was then circulated on YouTube and in Somalia—pointed to the fact that I was unveiled [...]; they paid heed to the message instead. [...] Today I went back and looked at it again [on YouTube]—it had reached 1,700 views (17:176, 181).

Such messages can have revolutionary power under the current circumstances both in Somalia and in the diaspora. This is especially true today, in an age of social media when the reach of messages is greater than ever before. Jamilah for instance recounts enthusiastically: “on Facebook, a young Somali wrote to me, saying that she is saving all my pictures and that she hopes she will be like me one day” (25:54). Ayaan is also convinced that her activism and subsequent exposure over the years were not in vain. Her advocacy appears from her own testimony to have had an impact, and not only among women. Recounting how her interlocutors in the diaspora perceived her public behaviour over time, she says:

I passed from total rejection, to ‘maybe you are right’ through to the open admiration I get today. In the diaspora community in \*\*\*\*\* they look at me like that, with admiration, women as well as youngsters, because I do what they wish they could do [...]; once a friend of mine eventually acknowledged to me: ‘Yes, you were right after all’ (17:188, 69).

Of course, it is one thing to be able to convey these messages abroad, in the Diaspora, in a relatively safe context, where sanctions do not go beyond condemnation or reprobation (at least in principle). It is another thing altogether to conduct oneself like this in Somalia. Yet, there are ways to bring the message across, although more subtly. One obvious option is to don traditional Somali attire (the *guuntino*). Although not in line with prevailing trend, the *guuntino* keeps criticism at bay somehow, since it comports with established tradition.

Italophone Somali women are also engaged in promoting gender-mainstreaming activities. Sometimes they belong to international networks advocating for women rights, or for women’s role in politics. The “pink quota” of 30% of parliamentary seats allocated (in principle) to women in the past parliamentary election (2017) was a great achievement—one that permanent female diaspora members and returnees belonging to the same advocacy network claim to have contributed to.

*More Freedom is Not Only Desirable, but Reasonable*

Within the restricted circle of their family and relatives as part of their ordinary activities, women also advocate for women rights, although this also entails risks. The message often conveyed is that a greater form of liberty, flexibility, and emancipation, is not only desirable, but also reasonable, if not rational. The possibility to directly access their targets, if not the source of the rule itself—the form of social control—represents a possibility to attempt a form of negotiation. Combined marriages, freedom of movement, the relationship with the tradition and the rule of the hosting culture, education of second-generation children, and relationship with pleasure are among the (often only hinted at) subjects in these private conversations. Hodan, who is in her early 50s, and a person of faith, says:

There is a boy who has married a girl whom he likes, and who belongs to another clan. Immediately people comment ‘ah, with another clan—no, we cannot allow this; it is not admissible!’ But God created us all equal, they [people from other clans] are as Somali as you are! So, by persisting in telephoning and talking about the issue with my sister, I managed to get her to change her mind [about cross-clan marriages] (11:24).

The issue of early and combined marriages seem very important to many Italoophone Somali diaspora women. They talk about ‘informed choice’ and advocate for it. Sagal refers to a friend of hers who is engaged in the field on these issues. She says:

In the meantime, we discuss [change] within our group here in London. Some of these women engage with social media, and they always try to convey positive messages, such as ‘we want a Somalia where women can study’. For example, I met a woman who used to study at the SNU, and then lived in America. Now she lives next to us [...] in Garowe [...]; she helps out many women. Many girls in Somalia marry early and many men marry more than two or three women, up to eight; so she holds public seminars [and] talks about informed choice (5:36).

The experience of Ayaan is similar in this respect. Although her narrative concerns life in a diaspora country and not Somalia, her experience is worth quoting in its entirety:

One of my brothers lives in \*\*\*\*\*. Even though our father always taught us respect and secularism, he [the brother] has started to make his daughters comply with certain rules, even though we cannot say he is a pious man. Now, all this has triggered some tensions. His

daughters live in \*\*\*\*\* too, and they have always observed me, my sister and my daughter behaving quite relaxed—loose, free to go and do as we wish [and] free from being covered. I then had an argument with my brother, and I told him that it would have been more coherent if he had gone to live in an Arab or observant country, but that he could not expect his daughters to behave in a traditional way while living in \*\*\*\*\*. By persisting in pressing him [on the issue], I got him to make a deal with us. We knew that if we did not intervene, we would lose our nieces. Well, in the end, he loosened his position (17:65).

Both these examples show how in the intimacy of the private relationships people can affect each other, and open space to talk more openly and convince family members to think from a different perspective and to reason. In so doing, they also consider the concerns of their family interlocutors. Ultimately, this is how they can bring about change.

It is also a matter of gaining confidence, little by little. Women can also be considered as catalyst of the message, “enjoying life is possible”. In a climate often dominated by threats to liberty and widespread sanctions for “Westernized” behaviours, fun, entertainment, and delight seem to have been banned from society. Yet, on various accounts, transitory diaspora women manage to organize parties and have fun right in the centre of Mogadishu, “like during the time of Siad Barre” as they nostalgically recall. In many interviews, a recurring theme in this context was having the courage to express oneself publicly in a way that shows one’s genuine interests and preferences to build a kind of ‘critical mass’ where others who share them will join so that there may be ‘safety in numbers’.

The experience of Jamilah is instructive in terms of the situation in Mogadishu, which today is subject to security alerts, a concentration in the reach of the institutions of social control, widespread corruption (Ingiriis 2015), bombings, and terrorist attacks. Yet, in the intimacy of their inner thoughts, people continue to aspire to another life, a feeling that timidly surfaces as soon as the bubble of individual isolation is pierced. For the Somali women has a special meaning, it is also a reference to the past, a vivid memory. As one female interlocutor noted:

Little by little, we managed to make a party in Mogadishu. We organized it like at the time of Siad Barre. We put on some music too! First Somali, then American, then Arab, from Sudan. It was a Friday and we danced too! It was a sort of disco for adults, but a private party. There was like a big hotel-restaurant hall, and we transformed it into a dancing hall. Later also the youngsters joined the party, and they liked it. So it was organized again and again. Now it has become a fixed appointment—the idea took hold. Now we organize it once a month (25:33).

Under the current circumstances (women rights, relationship with pleasure, pervasiveness of the forms of social control, widespread fear and isolation), implications and meaning of such an event in the heart of Mogadishu are far reaching. In addition, they have to be pondered against the backdrop I have described in the previous chapters.

## The Business Sector

A few among my interviewees are engaged in business. Within this realm, they tend to pass on a certain message, which is reflected in their practice, their behaviour, and the values they tend to stick too. In this section, I focus on these acts of communication, which essentially address the ‘productive’ aspects of social life. Against this backdrop, I have identified a recurring pattern and associated themes. The pattern is the teachers’ attitude, which inspires messages and permeates forms of civic engagement in this context. The themes are: the *importance assigned to self-reliance*, the idea that there are *plenty of resources*, and a *product-efficient mentality*.

### *Efficiency and Productivity*

Barre is a transitory diaspora member above the age of 50, who has some properties in Somalia and is engaged in the farming sector. While describing the nature and the implication of his presence and of his visits in Somalia he argues that:

When I’m in Somalia, they just see how I go to work in the morning, what I do, and I try to explain that you can plan, that you cannot always postpone [important matters]. For us, in Africa, the concept of time is absolutely static, motionless, whereas in Europe, time runs away—voilà. I try to teach how to exploit the day [to be productive] (4:15).

The idea of social change as development is relentless conviction among the Italoophone Somali diaspora. Complementing this view, the idea of an “emphatic” change agent—or “multiplier” (Lerner 1958)—engaged with the diffusion of innovations, in line with Roger’s work (2003: 376), is also common place among my interviewees. In fact, Barre’s understanding above embodies the old idea in disguise of the “mobile” and “transitional personality”, and of the “mobility multiplier” that was put forward by Lerner (1958) last century and in some ways was expanded by others (Rogers 1962, Schramm 1964). Daahir is a transitory diaspora member in his 50s, he is based in Italy, and he is

committed to his religion. He is absolutely convinced of the importance to ‘innovate’ the exploitation of the local resources for instance, to make the economy run better. He says “We have to teach these things to the people, because [our] tradition is nomadic. Take the example of buying lobster—in Somalia it barely costs \$10. On one of my trips I tried to communicate the point that if ‘you do it differently, you can extract \$50 from these resources’, but we have to go there, and teach the people” (12:54). Here we see the principles of modernization theory—the once dominant paradigm in Development Communication—reproduced at the level of everyday practice.

### *Self-reliance, Local Resources, and Old Models*

Other recurring messages are self-reliance and initiative. As Barre points out,

I feel I’m an example and a lesson for the Somalis. I want to teach the people how to work, how to produce, not to rely on the help of anybody. That’s 23 years that we have lived in this situation, which does not change, also because the country relies entirely on NGOs (4:25).

Italophone Somali diaspora members are quite sceptical about foreign and international interventions, as I have highlighted in Chapter 3. It is a form of aid fatigue (Hammond et al. 2011: 29) and humiliation fatigue (Bulhan 2013a: 9) quite diffused among those “left behind” as well. However, authentic Somali entrepreneurship, they believe, has the potential to leverage the country’s many latent resources, if tapped properly. Many try to convince the youngsters not to leave the country for instance, on what are named *taabrib* experiences (Ali 2016, Gonnelli 2015), but to remain and “exploit with their own hands, once duly trained, all the natural resources [Somalia] offers”, as Bilal puts it (7:31). He reports what he tells his students on a daily basis, which he details further as follows:

I tell them not to leave, not to go on *taabrib*, not to emigrate—they have to stay, instead, to exploit all the possibilities that there are in Somalia. Once they have studied, they will be able to exploit all the resources with their own hands [...]. I teach these students that we have a rich land, very rich, we just need to gain self-confidence, confidence in these resources, so we can develop on our own. We just need to take or find some aid, know-how and technology so we can exploit these resources (7:31; 7:70).

This is exactly how Jamilah fulfils her role. Talking about her financial remittance practices, she recounts what she did for one of her beneficiaries “we bought her a sewing machine: that’s what is important, to give them a source of income, not just a handout” (17:197). Other members of the

Italophone Somali diaspora are engaged in the import–export sector. Again, there is a tendency to interpret this role as one of “teaching”.

## Targets and Interlocutors

Data and interviews collected for the purposes of this research do not allow for a thorough examination of communication targets and interlocutors as distinct from each other. It is actually quite difficult to analyse them separately, for they in reality are inseparable. Targets can be at the same time interlocutors, or work as enablers, if not multipliers, with considerable overlap. More importantly, it is worth mentioning instead that when Italophone Somali diaspora members act in their public-facing roles, the inner constituents of the message also change, while preferred media and audiences reflect the context of the given sector. Those engaged in education address their endeavours to students and the like, opting for direct speech. Women, instead, occupied with gender issues, address a female audience through social media or private contacts. Entrepreneurs, traders, and farmers address their endeavours instead to the people directly employed by them or belonging to the same supply chain. Whatever the case may be, Italophone Somali diasporans seldom engage in any communication initiatives – advocating for social change - that would reach out to the general public or to larger audiences beyond their immediate (and observable) targets. Again, as detailed in Chapters 7 and 8, this is fear-based.

In their private capacity, instead, returnees, and permanent and transitory diaspora members usually enjoy greater margins of manoeuvre. In the intimacy of the family circle, but also via smart phones and other applications, my interlocutors report that their messages are more frank and overtly critical of the irrationality of the current state of affairs. Communication in this context may risk addressing politics, clannism and gender issues such as the education of girls, kids’ attire, the question of arranged marriages, and the practice of *dbaqaan celin*.<sup>181</sup> Seldomly though they embark on religious issues, at least while labelling them as such, as I have shown. Fear of exposure, mistrust, sometimes paranoia, are so diffused that they can prevent also at this level from disclosing their real stances and opinions, even within the restricted circle of close acquaintances and family members.

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<sup>181</sup> This notion combines two ideas *dbaqaan* (custom/tradition) and *celin* (return, return to the traditions). The practice of *dbaqaan celin* is diffused among Somali communities in northern Europe and the USA and involves sending younger generations born in the diaspora “back home” to learn the proper Somali (religious) culture and tradition.

Against this backdrop, it is worth classifying targets and interlocutors based on the combination of two variables: level of confidence and mutual trust, and (social) group or sector proximity. These can be arranged within these categories: 1) the circle of friends; 2) family members; 3) women and girls; 4) youngsters; 5) politicians, academia, and men of power, and finally; 6) “the masses” (i.e. the general public). I address each in turn according to the degree of proximity, beginning with friends.

### *Friendship Circles*

Friendship is a central intimate value among the Somali people so much so that it is frequently mentioned by most of my interlocutors. The importance that friendship plays in Somalia nowadays is strictly connected to the general lack of trust in broader social and interpersonal relationships. True friendship is, then, a last “comfort zone” in a difficult environment—even in some cases more than family. Friends in the “outer world” of the Italoophone Somali are the only ones who can be trusted with access to the “inner world”—inner beliefs, fears and honest opinions, also in religious matters. Friendship is the sole trans-clanic form of sociality,<sup>182</sup> as I call it, that I have come across with among my interlocutors. Friends and friendship, also as tolerance, could work as a source of inspiration for a Somalia (almost) freed from today’s issues. Among the restricted circle of friends, it is crucial to the Somali, as a last resort and opportunity, to be frank and outspoken.

As Bilal puts it, “There is a circle of friends, five or six with whom I meet up for a coffee, and with whom I talk freely” (7:37). Jamilah concurs, noting, “When we are among friends only I [can] express my [real, honest] point of view” (25:37). For the Italoophone Somali diaspora friendship is like a safe space or refuge from the battles, quarrels, animosity, loathing, defensive strategies, self-censorship and taboos that characterize everyday interactions. Besides being interlocutors, friends can also be addressees of communicative acts and practices meant to bring about change. In other words, they are sometimes also targets when they are communicating for social change. As Gurey puts it “I’m not directly active in the country, but I convey my messages to friends (doctors and others) who are already practicing in the field” (8:3).

Within this context, it is worth attempting a possible interpretation on the origin of friendship for the Italoophone Somali diasporans. Friendship seems to be a by-product of the past, rather than the present. It is as if friendship is possible only in a remote time and place. Based on my personal

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<sup>182</sup> A similar concept has been put forward by Stig Jarle Hansen (2013) concerning Al-Shabaab as a trans-clanic and Somali-Islamist form of nationalist adherence.

experience, solid relations of friendship are mostly built during the process leading to adulthood and in connection with schooling, playing activities, sport, and education in general. The same applies, I believe, to the Italoophone Somalis. However, within this context the implications of this process are by far greater than usual. Most of the people my interviewees address or would address as friends are in fact those met in school or at university level. For my interviewees, school and university experiences inevitably surface in the present as a shared pedigree. The period of formal education, in reason of its salience in their background, worked as a unifying and socially binding experience whose virtuous effects are still to be seen today. Despite the intervening civil war, clannism, clan cleansing, and rivalries, that experience appears to be truly trans-clanic and still viable under the current circumstances.

### *Family Members, Women and Girls, and Youngsters*

Apart from being natural and direct interlocutors in general, family members seem to be by far the preferred targets (and sometimes the only targets available) to women when they communicate for social change. Women diasporans tend to focus their communication activities in the direction of family (or close relations) as I have discussed, since they are severely limited by tradition and religion (in the current circumstances) in the extent to which they can be public facing. Thus, they turn to the inner dynamics of the household and the wider family network. Other women and girls are thus a “natural” target groups for women from the diaspora, or returnees, engaged in forms of communication for social change. Those taking action look at other women and girls as their preferred addressees.

“Youngsters” is a gendered term, referring to young males and employed by members of the male sub-group within the Italoophone Somali diaspora. As I have shown, men are engaged in a form of communication for social change mostly addressed to other men, and “youngsters” in particular. The main goal of the agents being to impart the value of “reason” and of using their own mind, and thoughts to these young men, age is good proxy that is inversely proportional to the expected outcome of their endeavours. Only with youngsters can they hope to bring about change, they feel, since they assume older generations have been irremediably compromised by the corrupted culture, have no experience with dialogue and are likely fixed in their approach. As Absimil puts it, “This message is addressed to the youngsters, when we deal together some issues, when we are in a meeting, when we meet up on various occasions” (6:11).

Both men and women, but men more so, tend to place their personal connections with the ruling elite, and the political power more in particular, at the centre of the conversation as laid out in previous chapters. Most of them claim to have strong relationships with political personalities and people of relevance in Somalia, who could potentially work as the “opinion leaders” discussed by Rogers (2003: 388).<sup>183</sup> My interviewees often mention “big names” that are in one way or another related (in a broad sense as relatives) to them: as members of the extended family, family friends, members of the government, or of the parliament, or the political class in general. This zealous referencing could be read as a way of “marketing” their social change capital, and the potential impact of their endeavours. Apart from instilling a sense of personal satisfaction, it is in their view the best way to make their message work more effectively. If, on the one hand, it is a way to look for recognition and self-esteem, it might on the other be an echo or a recollection—restated in the present for vivid effect—of their erstwhile placement in the social ladder, and of their once close proximity to the ruling class. This proximity is far less obviously today, if not completely missing.

Statements such as the following bear out this analysis:

Maybe I will talk about it [my project] with the members of the government, with my contacts with the ministries (6:14).

Yes, for instance I am in contact with someone inside the government, this minister sometimes calls me [for advice]; at other times, I am the one calling him. I have contacts with another minister, and with a parliamentarian [...]. I also know the president of Baidoa [...]. I also know the dean of the SNU [...]; he has asked me more than once to go [i.e. to return to Somalia] to contribute in some way (10:35, 127, 131).

Once I met with the President of Puntland [...] and with his Minister for Education, who is a friend (12:71).

Women too, as I anticipated above, tend to foreground these types of connections, especially when they are more politically engaged, at least in the diaspora. As Ayaan commented in an interview in 2016: “I also talk to the current Prime Minister, as I did with the one before him [...] recently they

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<sup>183</sup> “Opinion leadership is the degree to which an individual is able to influence other individuals’ attitudes of overt behaviour in a desired way with a relatively high frequency” (Rogers 2003: 388).

asked me to join a new party [...] people like them appreciate a woman like me” (17:26). She also noted how: “[Y]es, for that project I also received a letter of endorsement from President Gaas [of Puntland]” (17:147).

### *The Masses and the General Public*

The sixth target group in the concentric representation of targets and interlocutors I have laid out here are the “unschooled masses”, the “ignorant” people, as the Italoophone Somali diaspora members sometimes haughtily refer to them. They appear to be the ultimate target of any form of civic engagement stemming from the Italoophone Somali diaspora in general, for sure of any form of communication for social change as directly promoted by my interviewees. It works as an all-embracing category, with which the Italoophone Somalis actually enter into contact directly, or through other intermediates: representatives of one or the other categories listed above. I will take this theme up in further detail in discussion in Chapter 10.

## **The Communication Challenges**

The institutions of social control, including, *sa va sans dire*, their sanctioning power, impact all stakeholders of the Somali arena and on any form of communication for social change. How the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora make sense of the situation on the ground, while they frame the conditions under which the casual Somali is confronted, applies in turn to them, as subjects and objects within that context. Besides those controls, as experienced at the individual and personal level, the moment they take action, they are further exposed to an extra set of complications and issues. If they want to engage in a more overt form of communication for social change they have to bear in mind what it could imply in terms of: 1) isolation, as a status and as a sanction; 2) perception among locals, given their scarce receptivity and diaspora members lack of credibility in their eyes; 3) perception by Al-Shabaab and other agents of social control; 3) personal safety and; 4) fear in general. They ponder these variables quite explicitly, before making up their minds and deciding whether and to what extent they will engage with their country and society of origin. Not all members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora are in fact keen to do so and they differ in their willingness to expose themselves.

*To Commit or not to Commit, to Return or not*

Absolute disengagement with the home country among the Italoophone Somali diaspora is actually quite rare. In terms of civic engagement, certain forms of communication for social change can in fact be subtle, if not involuntary, and for this reason are quite common, irrespective of deliberated courses of action. To qualify as an act of communication for social change as theorized in the present research, it suffices to have contacts and family members with whom communication flows are entertained and a form of social change is somehow promoted (see Chapter 2).

Yet, there are Italoophone Somali diaspora members who prefer not to engage more substantially than this. If many are actually tempted by the prospect of returning to Somalia while trying to make a difference from within the country, they are then discouraged by what this might cost, in terms of safety, freedom, and peace of mind. Cumar offers a clear statement of how he prefers to avoid Somalia: “I worked with the Siad Barre administration [...] but above all I am scared by the religious fanaticism, maybe for what I have publicly declared here in London about Al-Shabaab. I exposed myself to people and I do not know whether or not they support Al-Shabaab” (1:17). Guuleed is of the same opinion, not wanting to return. He says “If I went to Somalia they would kill me the second day” (10:36). Asked why, he replies, “Because I say what I think [...]. I do not know how to flatter; I answer to no one”. Jamilah, who goes back and forth to Somalia running her business, is also tempted, but as a woman, she is severely challenged:

If there was enough security I would launch myself into saying whatever I think, I would launch myself into politics [...] even last time that was in Somalia, I had this opportunity, but there is a lot of risks, because you do not know where Al-Shabaab might be lurking (25:97, 99).

Threats to personal safety and security, if not acts of persecution and retaliation, are a great deterrent for many potential entrepreneurs of social change in Somalia. Nevertheless, many other Italoophone Somali diaspora members are quite motivated to return, and to engage directly. Motivations are actually multi-layered, overlapping, and composite. Barre for instance, a transitory diaspora member who runs a farm in Somalia, says that “we have experienced various cultures [...]; we have to implement the enrichment that comes from these migratory experiences” (4:5). Many variables are at play within this context, while they contribute to determine the final decision to commit, and up to

what extent. These variables are not mutually exclusive, although some might be dominant in relationship to others or show a greater relative weight.

In some cases, personal interests or benefits are openly accorded prevalence and precedence. Absimil for instance, a returnee in Mogadishu, while replying to the question on the reasons behind his return, says, “I had many properties that I wanted to recuperate [...] and I wanted to help this government pursue its interests, to contribute to change” (6:21). In some other cases such benefits carry less of a material connotation. It could be the Somali climate, exposure to the sun, or the company of the group of peers. Sometimes it might be a professional aspiration, a way to redress a frustration in the diaspora, or to sell back their social change capital, including any competitive advantage accrued over the years abroad (see Chapters 4 and 8).

In other cases, family, traditional, and cultural bonds or debts seem prevalent. They work as a sort of laces that never let the two side of the Diaspora drift away from each other, as the work of various scholars has detected (Hammond, Horst, Kleist, Lindley, and Mezzetti, among others). Within this context, financial remittances are also a way to level out the feeling of indebtedness towards the country of origin, and towards one’s own family, for having being raised, protected, nurtured there. Amiin, who periodically travels to Somalia, helping his father out with their local business, says that he is financially contributing to the enterprise “also because when I was a child he never let me lack for anything; he always gave me whatever I asked for [...]. And then again, if I don’t pay, how will I be able to free myself from him?” (9:25).

However, it is the educational debt the most relevant one among the Italoophone Somali diaspora. Its members seem to be particular sensitive to it. It is a recurring narrative and trope of their continued engagement. Seemingly, it is what motivates them the most to engage with their country of origin. Somalia offered them “a lot” in terms of (educational) opportunities, as a generation who could access “free of charge” school, training, scholarships programs, and university. Complementing these were other forms of educational agency, in the forms of civic and political engagement in the aftermath of the Second World War and during the first years of the military regime: political activism, anti-colonialism, state-building, the setting up of the public administration, the rural and urban campaigns of the period of Siad Barre, the “Orientation Centres” at the district level,<sup>184</sup> and so on. On many

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<sup>184</sup> Pietro Petrucci considers the experience of the “Orientation Centres”—the operating arm of the Ufficio Politico delle Forze Armate at the district level—one of the most distinctive aspects of the Scientific Socialism agenda during the first years of the regime. Here Somalis gathered to discuss socio-political needs and priorities. It saw the active participation of men and women alike. See also footnote no. 142.

accounts, these are the main constituent of their social change capital, and this is in turn what defines the forms and the motives of their engagement back home, as a reserve army of teachers. Sagal makes this point clearly:

Among our generation, there is still a strong drive to return, to do something [...]; the intelligentsia left the country. Now, instead, they all think or hope to return, at least those of the old generation [...]. You see, me too; I used to work at the Somali National University [...] as an assistant. We are that group of people that still has this kind of aspiration towards our homeland [...]. Sometimes I wonder what kind of satisfaction I can really derive here [in the UK]. Sure, here I can also contribute to improving things, but what a change I can make in Somalia—the difference I can make in Somalia is much greater! (5:2, 4, 8)

Bilal expresses a similar stance:

I decided [to return to Somalia] for three reasons: firstly, because I felt indebted towards my country [as] I studied thanks to public financial support. Secondly, because I gained a PhD, and thanks to that I have been able to work for many years abroad, and I want to put into practice what I have learned in my country also. Thirdly, because of the weather and the [cold] climate, which are pretty challenging in Denmark (7:5).

The same applies to Maxamed, who notes:

I feel attached to my country [Somalia] by a sense of duty that is strong within, in my heart, and that makes me prefer this situation compared to the more comfortable one I might have enjoyed in Italy. I studied in a public school, and then I won the only position that back then \*\*\*\*\* [an international organization] put at disposal of Somalia, it was \*\*\* [year]. Well, in a situation as difficult as this one, for these people [in Somali today], I felt the need to return and offer a hand [...] the origin of my engagement is this—to reciprocate, to give back (15:4, 7).

Maxamed feels “the need” to give back rather than feeling “obliged to give back” (Hammond 2011). There is a strong proactive component in the decision that many Italoophone Somali diaspora members take in committing to a trajectory of return. In the current circumstances, it could not be otherwise: it is often a compulsion to help, because of the attachment towards the country and its people. Caaisho’s example is a case in point:

After 25 years, I felt nostalgic about Somalia; I wanted to help. I was born and raised in Mogadishu; it is my land, and I wanted to return and help the people, because in an article I read it was reported that three in every four people in Somalia are crazy [i.e. have some kind of mental illness] [...] then I asked myself, ‘why don’t you go and help your people?’ (26:2)

### *The Communication Gap*

As discussed above, when presenting the main “targets” of their communication for social change, the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora have one main and ultimate target in mind: “the masses”. The cultural and social change capital of the former constitutively puts them at odds with the latter: they are separated, purportedly, by educational attainment, language skills (Italian and English as well), and knowledge (of the world). The Italoophone Somali diaspora members are the bearers of a certain understanding of the world, of a certain *Weltanschauung*. They compete with the new religious interpreters and sometimes the ruling elite for ‘control’ of the masses. All leading actors of the Somali arena actually compete with each other for the support of the society, for having the people marry their cause, or just passively suffer and accept it. Beyond the material level, it is a war fought in the consciences of the Somalis. At times, it is a war of numbers, a propaganda war, and a war of fear, among clans, among religious interpretations, among representatives of corporate interests, among competing traditions. Within this framework, “the masses” are often perceived as the passive recipient whose support must be gained or won.

For the purposes of communication for social change, the masses pose quite some challenges. In dealing with them, the Italoophone Somali diaspora claim in fact to be confronted with their diffused level of “ignorance”, as they refer to it, while adopting a distant attitude towards the people back home. It is this “ignorance”, as they see it, which paternalistically and purportedly strains any attempt at communication. It makes the exchange of views, the request for clarification, the offering of suggestions, quite complicated, sometimes even dangerous. It severely affects the intensity, depth, and scope of the communicative act, thus hindering a proper communication flow. Ultimately, Italoophone Somali seem to prefer not to expose themselves to risk. It is worth presenting the details of this fear in the words of my interviewees themselves. Absimil, for example, notes:

[I am afraid] of everybody. These people have no education, they have lived in hatred, war—you have to be careful. I only frequent certain restaurants, certain [safe] places [...] from a cultural point of view, we [...] from the diaspora and they are very different. And this is mainly

due to their lack of education—they never had a chance to go to school—we do not understand each other, and this sometimes entails the risk of death [...]. A portion of the population are extremist, vulgar, uneducated. It is hard to communicate [with them]; I only try to listen to them, and to limit any discussion. Sometimes I make the mistake to try to understand something, and they immediately speak bad words to me, and then I stop immediately (6:16, 19, 43).

The experience of Jamilah, a transitory diaspora member, is quite similar in this respect. She says, “I tried to communicate what I found to be wrong, but from a mentality point of view we did not understand each other, so in the end I desisted” (25:1).

### *With Whom Do I Talk?*

Isolation is another issue that the Italoophone Somali diaspora experience, which has far-reaching impacts on communication for social change. It works both as a lived condition and as a fear of sanction, as laid out in Chapter 7. Many Italoophone Somali diaspora representatives that I have interviewed live in relative isolation. A wall of fear, comfortable routines, sometimes pretence, isolates them from the rest, from potentially like-minded people, and advocates of the same cause. Women, more than men, tend to express this during our interviews. They seem to be particularly affected by this problem, which most probably is perceived as a cause of further distancing them from the rest of the society, and relegate them solely to the inner circle of the family. Hodan, as shown while discussing quotation 11:58, (in Chapter 7) is unsure about whether her views are shared by anyone else. Asked about the possible existence of like-minded people she says, “Maybe there are some, but I don’t know them” (11:14). Hani, a female returnee, echoes this point, saying, “I don’t know how many we are, how many I don’t know, are we many?” (30:37). Cilmi is positively surprised to learn that other Somalis share his views: “[That is] very interesting, I don’t know \*\*\*\*\*, but it gives me a feeling of trust and hope to know that in some corners of the world there is a Somali that shares my way of thinking, and who speaks about the recovery of our identity, however cautiously” (14:44). These statements reveal up to what extent interpersonal communication among Somalis is impaired, obstructed, sometimes completely blocked.

Italoophone Somali diasporans recursively describe their existence as isolated from the rest of the community—in other words, that they “belong” and are “included” in only a superficial or instrumental way. There is a sort of disconnection at the level of the “inner world”. Uba, a permanent

diaspora member based in UK, laments this condition—namely, the fact that she can rarely give free rein to her stances: “very little, you can only do that with those who understand you” (24:37, 24:48). Hodan yearns for “a united Somalia [where there are] no clans, no Al-Shabaab” but notes that “I only talk about this with my family [...] here in Italy, I don’t say ‘let’s do this and that’; we live in an isolated way; I go to work, come back home, I have my family”(11:58). Along similar lines, Ayaan, who is permanently based in Italy, notes: “But then again, with whom do I talk?” (17:130).

People do not talk freely and openly. Public and private dimensions are kept apart, while in public there is very little scope even for apparently trivial details in some cases. Amiin, on occasion of his last trip to Somalia, to look after the business he set up together with his father, says:

I did not talk to anybody about anything, I just said how I felt; I did not even dare to say when I was leaving again. I announced [at the start] that I planned to stay a couple of months, but I only had four weeks at my disposal. All those who return to Somalia have more or less this same fear [...] when I went back in 2013, I no longer trusted anybody. In Mogadishu, I have a cousin—he and my father are the only ones I trust. As to the rest, I don’t talk to anybody about these things (9:11, 9:31).

“These things” to which he refers are the new tradition, Al-Shabaab, the civil war going on in Somalia, the climate of fear following the advent of the new dominant religious interpreters, clannism, and so on.

### *Impacts on Potential Vectors of Social Change*

Chapter 7 recounted the mechanisms of social control identified by members of the Italo-phone Somali diaspora. I turn here to discuss how this impacts those deciding to take action by enacting a form of communication for social change. The challenges that I am addressing as disjointed are actually the same facet of an intricate set of issues: the communication gap and isolation interplay with fear leading to people adopting a low profile.

Taking action, or just practicing one’s own profession, which is inevitably underpinned by certain values, can be quite risky in today’s Somalia. Maxamed’s universalism and mixed modernism, as a physician, in treating everybody irrespective of clan affiliations, and in promoting new approaches not always in line with the Somali tradition, or at odds with a certain religious interpretation, have attracted physical and verbal threats on more than one occasion. He suggests during our interview

that at times, a not well-identified religious power has threatened him over the phone. He says, “Sometimes they have called me. They have threatened me of death, and I have replied, no listen, you do not \*\*\*\*\* kill anybody, it is not you who kills, it is not you who can take life away” (15:32). Maxamed is keen on taking some risks: he faces his ‘persecutors’ as one might face his destiny. Others prefer to adopt a lower profile.

Cabdi, for instance, describe in these terms his general approach: “you cannot send strong messages, you have to be controlled in what you say, you cannot go to the bar, drink a coffee, and tell what you think, the next day you are dead. We had better stay in our hotel, and talk only to the trusted people” (19:16). He continues “we maintain, for instance, many relationships with international NGOs—Caritas Somalia, German Caritas, etc—that are covered” (19:17). Cabdi belongs to the political elite, he lives in hotels in Mogadishu, and he has international contacts and collaborations: he knows he might potentially become a target, not only of ‘religiously’ driven terrorist attacks, but also of politically or clan motivated retaliations. He tries to play it safely in the context.

Jamilah is another case in point. She belongs to the transitory diaspora. She visits the country for short periods that are nonetheless sufficient to realize how much things have changed, as she recounts, and to remain emotionally involved. She claims to have attempted to shake the consciences of her interlocutors, by making them mindful of what Somalia used to be, and how women used to live. In return, she has received an admonition for her ‘misconduct’: “we advise you not to talk in this way” (25:6). Probably she will refrain from exposing herself again, since she is “scared now”.<sup>185</sup>

Finally, among the returnees, the following “admission” from Geddi is quite revealing in terms of current minority concerns and the bigger and stronger clans. He says:

I’m just realizing that very few parts of my answers [to the interview questions] can be published without me seriously endangering my life. I recommend that you do not let anybody read them—even persons that declare themselves to be Benaadir [inhabitants of the southern Banaadir coast]—because on many occasions we’ve seen Somalis disguising themselves as such in order to gather information [on others]. Nevertheless, mine are sincere answers—personal, but sincere (27:39).

Moreover, he continues by arguing that certain parts of his answers might possibly trigger a violent reaction from a certain clan family. He is not even sure about forms of surveillance on his email

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<sup>185</sup> By the time of writing (2018), Jamilah had decided to switch the country of her business operations away from Somalia.

accounts: “Usually I do not use the internet café [for communicating], because I’m not sure of the privacy of the emails” (27:70). Again, on another occasion: “Only under the cover of anonymity can I give you sincere answers” (27:71). He adds, “It would be good that nobody talks about it, not even about an Italoophone Somali returned to \*\*\*\*\* [i.e. a generic returnee]” (27:85). These remarks are quite revelatory of the state of angst and distress that confront many Somalis today.

### *Impacts on Data Collection: a Case in Point*

Fear and self-censorship are pervasive among the Italoophone Somali diaspora and in Somalia more generally. I am not in a position to judge the exact impact of these on data collection: in establishing the contacts (which contacts) and then interviewing my sample (what answers). It cannot be neglected though that, potentially, implications for the quality of the data, of reliable data, are significant. How much of what I have been told is actually the full story of what is actually perceived and feared? What went missing or was skipped altogether? How many details did not reach the stage of my final analysis? What level of in depth the conversation never attained?

I have already addressed these aspects in the methodological chapter. However, I believe it is worth quoting within this section the interview experience with one of my interviewee. More in particular it is quite interesting to follow Caaisho’s evolution in her reactions to my questions on occasion of our two rounds of conversation. During the first, once I had explained purpose and scope of the research, and had clarified (read: reassured her about) the confidentiality and privacy policies, she told me: “[T]here is a problem; I don’t want you to use \*\*\*\*\* [i.e. her real name] in any publication; they all know me by this name in the whole Somalia. Just write “Dr Faduma” [i.e. “Mrs Smith”], the classic Somali name for ladies—this could be anybody” (26:1). Once more reassured about it, Caaisho finally let herself speak more freely. She is back in Mogadishu, helping people, but she does not feel safe expressing her views or ideas. She says:

I’m afraid, and if I’m afraid there is a problem to be afraid of. When you say something bad about the government, they are after you. If you say something bad about these Imams [she says *sacerdote* in Italian]<sup>186</sup> and warriors they are after you. You have to keep quiet, with no

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<sup>186</sup> Caaisho might have meant the generic man of religion, of God (Wadaads) as opposed to the warrior, the spear-bearers (the Waranleh), a traditional division in Somali pastoral society. On this, see Lewis (1999: 27).

ears, you have to keep silent; so from home I go to work, and back home, and I don't talk to anybody (26:14).

Caaisho's stance falls within the pattern I have generally identified for the members of the Italo-phone Somali diaspora. Yet, during our follow-up conversation, she indicates a completely different approach. She seems to be in denial, oblivious of what she had just claimed the day before. I reproduce this excerpt in its entirety, including my lines in the conversation. Asked about possible purposeful communication flows she maintains with her counterparts in Somalia, she asserts:

A: I never talk to anyone, or to other people outside. I don't like to talk about the political aspects; I am very closed as a person. I don't like to talk about politics or other things.

Q: Are you maybe afraid to discuss these topics?

A: I don't like it, that's all.

Q: So you never convey any message?

A: No, I haven't had the time so far to do so. Now that you make me think about it, I go to work, and I come home. I like cooking, watching TV, entertainment programmes, movies from the USA.

Q: And, from a religious point of view, has the situation changed for women?

A: No, the religion is always the same, there isn't a difference, and the religion was always like that and will always be like that; there isn't much more to say about it! (26:35, 26:36, 26:37, 26:43)

“There isn't much more to say about it” is a definitive answer. She has maybe sensed a danger or perhaps simply changed her mind. We never had a chance to talk again. The difference between the first and the second accounts is striking: after venting her frustrations at our first interview, she adopted completely different language the second time, maybe regretting having potentially “exposed” herself to some kind of threat or danger.

The same pattern, although to a lesser extent, applies to other interviewees, among them Jamilah, Uba, and Sagal. In other words, it concerns women more than men. Men tend to be more restrained in their accounts. This might be explained by the fact that women are those who suffer more from the current state of affairs, and from the forms of social control. When invited to discuss the subject, they tend to react more emotionally, to disclose, to let it go, because it is also a burden on their conscience. Right afterwards they fear that what they have said might somehow expose them to some sort of danger, and, in the follow-up meeting or conversation, they prefer to adopt a different strategy.

Men instead, for whom this state of things is maybe less unbearable, tend to build up a relationship of trust as time goes by and (interview) meetings take place.

## **The Communication Strategy**

To bring about change—or simply to resist the dominant forms of social control, including the religious turn—returnees, transitory, as well as permanent diaspora members need to adopt a set of strategies, if they are to contain the risk of being sanctioned. The challenges that I have discussed above, namely isolation, the communication gap, and fear in turn affect the forms and contents of the communication flow. Depending on their location and their plans for the future, preferred media, precautions, and targets can differ. In general, Italoophone Somali diaspora members adopt: 1) a survival strategy, which is meant to preserve their own safety, and the possibility to convey a certain message, while avoiding troubles; 2) a proper communication strategy, which is meant to pass on and deliver the message they would like to convey.

### *Avoidance in the Field*

As discussed in Chapter 7 and in this chapter, there is a general tendency among Italoophone Somali diaspora members to avoid exposure to (potential) sources of danger or debates deemed ‘risky’. These sources come into play also here, for the purposes of communication for social change, and represent a reason of concern for those deciding to take action. In today’s Somalia—notably in the South–Central region—there are many no-go topics that can spark disputes or raise suspiciousness, especially in public contexts and in the presence of unidentified audiences. Broadly speaking these topics are political, clanic, and religious issues: the “taboos” that I have discussed in Chapter 7. Returnees, permanent, and transitory diaspora members who want to preserve their life, their interests, and the possibility to go back to Somalia, need to keep clear from these topics or, in alternative, to be able to deal with them without revealing a stance too different from the one only ‘guessed’ or just ‘feared’ of their interlocutor(s). In some cases, however, fear about these issues becomes overwhelming, literally immobilizing the person, in her/his thinking and movements.

On several occasions, among potential vectors of social change in the field (read: my interviewees), I have registered comments about this no-go subjects. Absimil, based in Mogadishu, says, “Whenever I talk I never discuss religious or cultural ideas, especially with those that have never

left the country, and with them I rarely talk about politics” (6:9). Guuleed, who is permanently settled in the diaspora and has many friends and associates among the super elite, says: “I am very careful, I try to not step over the religious line; I try not to be against [anything]” (10:87), adding that “you should not discuss about politics, you should not expose yourself with regards to religious issues, and you should not step over an economic interest of theirs” (10:121). These accounts are corroborated by Caaisho’s depiction of an alumni gathering. As in part already quoted (Chapter 7, “Taboos Subjects and Behaviours”), she says that once at the restaurant, at the beginning of the event:

[T]here is always a man who stands up, and says to the audience, ‘we won’t talk about certain topics: no politics, no clans, no religion’. And so we talk about the way we were, very simply, we were born and raised up in the same period, in the ‘good old days’ (26:29).

A corollary of this general attitude consists of the adoption of a low profile approach in the public sphere, on social or other media. And yet social media, as I have shown discussing the messages in the previous sections, can work as a powerful outreach tools and message multipliers. It depends on a case-by-case basis, how much risk Somali agents are willing to tolerate, what is their location in Somalia and in the diaspora, what are their plans for the future, in what type of business they are, and so on. Of course, a very important variable is represented by the local Somali community of belonging—namely, how strong its presence and control are perceived. Attitudes to risk also vary based on the intention or motivation to go back, even for short periods. As Ayaan correctly points out “belonging to that part of the diaspora that has no intention to return and live in Somalia, I have no particular problems in saying with respect and directly what I think” (17:13). That is why she resorts to YouTube for instance, where a video about her speech is available: “The video is circulated on YouTube, on-line streaming [...]. Everybody has seen it, also in Somalia [...]”. Geddi also looks to social media, and, among them, at academia.edu, as a way to disseminate his knowledge, his articles, and his projects, besides talking to those people “from the neighbourhood [those] who are in a position to appreciate the value of [his] projects”. In his case, the apparently neutral character of the pursued goals, neutral concerning clanic, religious, or political issues, represents a good alibi for promoting certain values and messages.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> I limit discussion of further details in the interest of ensuring participants’ confidentiality.

### *Adopted Communication Strategies*

Within this general context people need to sharpen their wits if they want to get their messages across. Those engaging in a form of communication for social change resort to three main strategies: 1) eliciting from within the group; 2) behavioural modelling, and; 3) reiteration.

Eliciting is adopted by predominantly those engaging as teachers in the education sector—again, in the broad sense detailed in the sections above. Their goal is to accompany their target along a reasoning path in a subtle way, a logical argument and similar, in order to spark a debate, a form of clear and, as much as possible, unbiased thinking. In particular, men returnees reveal that they never approach their subject openly, but only in stages. As Absimil points out

I try not to address the subject directly—one should approach it in steps, and as soon as you realize that they somehow accept what you are saying, then you administer your dose! You convey your message little by little, but never overtly or completely, you resort to similes, adopting a positive attitude, a friendly tone (6:23).

This recalls the discussion of Bilal (7:34) in the section on the messages. He bets everything on the free discussion “I would put the stress on the free debate, so that the truth can surface” (7:65). With this goal in mind, diaspora members tend to adopt an inclusive language, by avoiding for instance the “we/they” opposition, while trying to promote social change from within. They do so as if they belonged to the same [religious] group, class, or affiliation, to which their interlocutors (supposedly) belong. These words by Absimil are quite revealing (6:56) “you have to be very humble, you have to talk like one of them, to make jokes with them, to be with them”. The same applies to Guuleed (10:89) who says “to make a criticism, or put forward an alternative, I always say «we are», I place myself within, hence they can’t tell me anything, «we are like that»... moreover I am very lucky, nobody understands to which clan I belong, I talk to all clans”.

Behaviour and dress. Another consciously adopted strategy is behavioural in nature. Members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora believe that they can represent an example to be followed, just by looking at them, at their behaviour and look. I have already discussed the importance of the dress code, especially among women, in various chapters, including the present one when dealing with the messages. For most of the female representatives of my sample, the wearing of a certain look works as a way of defending the Somali tradition, their understanding of it. Similar look issues, although to a lesser extent, apply also to men. They too, they have witnessed a change in the dominant forms of

communication linked to the dress code. Their look can reveal their background or provenance. Absimil says (6:57) “in terms of look I don’t manage, and you realize immediately if you are from the town [Mogadishu] or if you come from elsewhere, I wear shirts and trousers, and they understand immediately where you are from, they do not dress like that, some dress like the Arabs”.

Reiteration. Only within the restricted circle of the family, members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora can afford to take some extra risk, expose themselves further, and insist on the wished change. By engaging in repeated conversations with their targets, they manage at times to change minds, and adopt a more liberal approach or decision. As I have shown concerning combined and early marriages, Hodan says, “So, by persisting in telephoning and talking about the issue with my sister, I managed to make her change her mind” (11:24). Ayaan has also managed to reach a reasonable compromise with her brother who, for fear of promiscuity, refused to allow his daughters to wear a swimsuit at the seaside in a diaspora country.<sup>188</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have addressed more specifically Communication for social change from an Italoophone Somali diaspora perspective. I have answered, hopefully, the sub-questions of my research project: how Italoophone Somalis articulate social change (the message), how they communicate or enact it (targets, media and strategies), and what are the main challenges they are confronted with (isolation, fear, communication gaps).

Within this context, communication strategies are meant to circumvent possible sanctions, while messages are meant to instil the germs of that way of thinking, reasoning, acting, and behaving that seem incredibly lost and vanished in the present. There is a pre-war and a post-civil war Somali culture, separated by a great divide: they seem to be light-years apart. From here, from this difference, for the Italoophone Somali diaspora, the possibility of (social) change, of movement, of (taking) action is given.

Yet, in the current circumstances, this potential is severely mutilated and impaired. Any timid act of Communication for social change appears more as a drop in the ocean than as a concrete opportunity to bring about change. Fear is so pervasive and widespread, that it prevents the entire process from unravelling, in full or in part. Indeed, there is a form of Communication for social change going on at interpersonal level, among laypersons, as I claimed in the theoretical chapter and

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<sup>188</sup> See Ayaan (17:65) within the section More Freedom is Not Only Desirable, but Reasonable.

found in practice. Nevertheless, as things are in Somalia today, it has very few possibilities to produce a sensible impact in the country in general and for the Somali people. First Italophone Somali agents of change, if they are to take properly action, need to realize their own potential, gain courage and legitimacy.

## Chapter 10

# Education as the Concluding Theme of Social Change in Somalia

### Communication for Social Change and the New Religious Culture

This research project is about social change and more specifically communication for social change in Somalia as experienced and promoted by members of the Somali diaspora and returnees at non-institutional and interpersonal levels. The main research question informing the study is: how do Somali diaspora members/agents envisage social change in their home country? This entails two subsidiary questions: how do they communicate and promote this vision back home? What are the main challenges they confront in doing so?

First, I sensed the existence of a socio-cultural sub-group within the Somali diaspora—the Italoophone Somali diaspora as I call it—of which my first interviewees happened to be part. By delving further into the main constituents of their background, I came to appreciate what I have referred to in Bordiesian terms as their “social change capital”—consisting in cultural, social, and religious capital, their memories and their diasporic experience—and the role that education plays in its definition and development. Within this framework, I highlighted the past and continuing relevance of the Italoophone cultural influence and attached language skills, which ultimately defines belonging to the group and to my research sample.

I addressed the main research question on the vision of change to this particular sub-group. It turns out, I contend, that members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora today confront much higher levels of social control than they experienced when they were young adults starting out on their life journeys. This social control is exercised by and through three key social institutions in Somalia, each of which entails its own identity dynamic and mechanisms of control: the clan, Somali tradition, and Islam. Social change in Somalia is predominantly understood as socio-institutional change and revolves around the respective institutional codes (clanic, traditional, and religious), which are historically determined and thus ‘amendable’. In particular, this sub-group apprehends social change as the lessening of the pervasiveness of these institutions of social control, with their burden of expected behaviours and sanctions.

Clannism (rather than the clan per se) remains a central impediment to inclusive citizenship, post-civil war reconciliation and the development of a true sense of Somali ‘nationhood’ and patriotism. It is a source of individual political compliance and mass mobilization, which today more than ever seems unquestionable, ineluctable, and inescapable. Post-civil war property, territorial, and resource disputes among clans further undermine the prospect of a thoroughgoing process of national reconciliation that would offer a full accounting of the wrongs committed by all sides during the civil war (Kapteijns 2013, Abdhullahi 2017). While armed conflict between the clans appears to be a feature of the past, a full reconciliation between them remains elusive. My interviews suggest that women are more willing to define community belonging in ‘national’ rather than clan terms (at least rhetorically) than men, who seldom seem willing to challenge the clan logic. As I have recalled at various points in the thesis, a common refrain among my interviewees was “despite assertions to the contrary or what someone might claim about him or herself, no Somali would ever really defy his or her clan”. This highlights a central point, which is that few people in the Italoophone Somali diaspora are prepared to articulate a challenge to the clan for themselves. It is hold on them personally thus appears immutable, in fact if not rhetorically. This is less true in their approach to minority groups, where they appear to advocate forms of minority rights and addressing of grievances that challenge strong clan power. The same applies to the younger cohorts within the sub-group I interviewed, who are bound to a view of all-encompassing religious community that abjures clan-oriented vengeance and reprisals.

Tradition, with a “capital T” in the sense I put forward in Chapter 6, is the source of another set of rules, customs, habits, prescriptions, and code of conducts. Its authority is again perceived, on various accounts, as another impediment towards social change. The Italoophone Somali diaspora are the bearers of a certain tradition, which is competing now for legitimacy and space in the Somali arena. Tradition is not just a single, monolithic concept (and practice), but they are many, there are different readings, often conflicting with each other. Many among my sub-group members are preoccupied to amend the implications of tradition in terms of dietary prescriptions and damage compensation, for instance. However, women, more than men, seem to engage more and further than this. In a patriarchal society, such as the Somali, they suffer more from the current reading of Tradition, in the name of which they perceive that their status has regressed. They are more preoccupied with restoring their own old tradition, which corresponds to what they experienced in the Somalia of the pre-civil war period. Dress code, public behaviour, access to pleasure, self-

determination and the like come into play here. The understanding of this cultural heritage is now competing with a new course, they claim, which is more Arab oriented and religiously orthodox.

Finally, Islam, the religious code and its interpretation: the ultimate end game in Somalia. Italoophone Somali men and women alike are very concerned by the new dominant, or apparently dominant, interpretation of the religious message. Islam as it is understood and practiced today does not correspond to their understanding of religion. They look at themselves as ordinary interpreters, they are at odds with a dominant culture in Somalia that they perceive as radical because it has devoured the separation between the secular and the spiritual, politics and religion. Tolerance, freedom of thinking, freedom in general, dialogue, possibility of different readings of the religious code, gender issues, and white contaminations are the key words of this divide, where actual stances can only be appreciated against the individual lived experience.

Memories play a pivotal role in all this process revolving around concealed, frozen or advocated instances of change. They work as a source of inspiration and resistance against the present state of decadence. They also play a role in terms of communication strategies, especially for women. While advocating for their liberty, or an approximation of it, memories work as a source of legitimization, and a recurring 'defence line'. Based on their experience women claim to be on the right track, and to be the right interpreters of Islam, or of the Tradition. Within this framework the past is not only behind them, the place of memories and of the "good old days", but also the future to be pursued, and the aspired for change ahead. It often works as an ideal to win back, and as a source of entertainment in the misery of the present.

The members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora do qualify as development communicators or—under the rubric advanced in Chapter 2 as 'communicators for social change'. They do engage with a form of social remittance over time, rather than over space, that I have investigated from a communicative point of view. They do reveal a modernization posture, although their modernism is quite selective, and it is more the method of their practice rather than the content of their transfers. They do have their own theory of social change as enacted by the Somali Diaspora through their social change capital. My interviewees engage, in various degrees, as laypersons and at interpersonal level, in a form of communication that is meant to promote social change. They try to amend the rules of the traditional code, to advocate for an alternative reading of the religious code, to promote peace values. They aim at reintroducing a certain level of openness and tolerance within the Somali society, to make people think with their own brain, to reason, to think more rationally and logically.

They strive, with extreme difficulty to pass on a message, overtly or covertly, not aligned with the dominant culture today in Somalia.

However, widespread levels of fear, conformism, and self-censorship pose a serious challenge to Italoophone Somali diaspora members' actual outputs and impacts. They dare and sometimes manage to get their message across within their target audiences, in the restricted circle of their families, or via social media. But their endeavours are however hypothecated and kept hostage by diffused distress and isolation, by the threat of the judgement. Condemn and sanctions are potentially enacted by their interlocutors and targets, their group of peers, the community of belonging (clanic or religious), or the leading actor (ruling elite, new religious interpreters) in the field, whenever their behaviour and their stances are perceived as not compliant. Their rare attempts at conveying a different message are jeopardized by a permanent, cosmetic, and instrumental acquiescence. They have to keep a low profile if ever they are to achieve the aimed change. They have to adopt a survival strategy to not incur in retaliations and a proper communication strategy if they want to be effective.

Yet, I argue, it will not be through the means of Communication for social change that they will be able to effectively bring about change in Somalia. It can work in certain cases, at individual level, but not at mass level. It will not be through a mass return – of diaspora members - either, as they sometimes conjecture about it. Maybe, they realize the unviability of this project themselves, without confessing it. The “masses” remain their main target though, the would-be natural receiver of their social change capital. Italoophone Somali diaspora members engage with those left behind in various forms of communication for social change, which are meant to open up a free discussion, to instil the importance of reasoning and of rationality, to cautiously amend the Tradition. However, their endeavours—that is, whenever they dare to take action—are too subtle and too dispersed at the individual level to be able to make an appreciable difference in the society. Aware of this, they actually look at Education – in general - as the last and ultimate resource in the Somali context, as a possible way out. Not without reason, as shown in Chapter 9, the education sector, broadly speaking, remains the preferred sector of engagement for this reserve army of teachers.

## **Education is the Key**

Education is the key word of the Somali chapter, and one of the major threads running throughout this entire research. It seems the cornerstone of all the dynamics revolving around any process of

social change today in Somalia. It works as a sector of preference for many Somali of the Diaspora “(re)turning” to Somalia, in their formal or informal endeavours. Being education one of the main constituents of their social change capital, le fil rouge of their learning experiences over time, at home and abroad, it defines in turn the forms and the contents of their engagement towards their society of origin today.

Education has to be understood here in its broad sense—namely, as a means for someone to become a role model, and point to a possible way ahead, at both interpersonal and social level. It is, in other words, the educational experience shared by the Italoophone Somali diaspora sub-group, in Somalia and abroad, and the socio-cultural and religious capital that emerges out of this. It must also be apprehended as formal and secular education, free of charge, and open to all, which Somalia so badly lacks today. But also, it must be understood as the accumulated capital of knowledge and values that define the Italoophone Somali elite in comparison with “the masses” and the people “left behind”. It is the promotion of independence of thought and reasoning, self-reliance, interpretation skills and of a renewed model of Somaliness, where the affects of “nobility” and “pride”, and an attributed inferiority–superiority complex—including the quest for recognition—are replaced by dignity and self-esteem. Finally, it must be understood as the main pillar of Italoophone Somalis diasporic engagements back in the home country; as background, identity, competitive advantage, faculty, memory, and friendship.

It is in the education sector that main resources and assets should be concentrated and invested: all my interviewees agree on this. They look at it as experienced back in the “good old times”, as a projection of that model, that was ‘corrupted’ and ‘contaminated’ by definition.<sup>189</sup> They look at it as a foundation that underpins the average Somali, along or in competition with the clan, the tradition, and Islam. This quote below, to which I have already referred, and that I borrow again from Hoehne (2010: 30), well represents a point of view that is recurrently expressed by my interviewees:

Only an educated person who has self-confidence can stand alone. Until a person reaches this level, s/he has to lean on something, either on the clan or on another person who gives advice. If the generation that grows up now is taught and understands something, then it can happen that they break with the past and say: ‘We are a new people, we are a new generation and we wish to have our own future.’ The previous generation brought about war and weapons; that’s

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<sup>189</sup> If the Italian influence was relevant for the future Italoophone Somali Diaspora, other sources of instruction, such as Arabic, English, or Russian, were also influential for other segments of the Somali society.

how they grew up. I see education as the only solution [for Somalia's problems]. But it will take a long time. Here is something we [as diaspora] can do.<sup>190</sup>

Italophone Somali diaspora members share the same view and vision. Their laic, secular or “non-Islamist”<sup>191</sup>—as Abdhullahi (2017) put it—understanding of education is reflected in the following list of comments. Beydaan maintains, “The role of education is fundamental. Ignorance is one of the strongest and more rooted issues in Somalia, which does not allow you to talk, listen or dialogue” (3:82). Barre confirms this stance and reiterates the role of the diaspora. He says: “The only thing that can change and improve things, especially with regards to the religious fanaticism is education. You overcome all this through school, rationality, which shelters you from fanaticism. And the school needs us, that we have lived outside, in the diaspora” (4:11). Absimil, asked about which sector he would invest in, if he had the financial resources, replies “in the education, in public schools, free of charge, to educate all those who want to study, from the children up to the adults” (6:29). Gurey is quite technical, and pays attention to the importance of homegrown solutions: “Nutrition education, properly planned, with community participation in setting the priorities, venue and timing of the sessions [is crucial]. During the training, a careful approach is needed in addressing topics such as taboos and [traditional or religious] beliefs. Simple, affordable and locally available recipes are better accepted” (8:7). He adds, “For social change and development to be obtained in Somalia, priority should be given to basic education and professional training” (8:51). Daahir notes that education is the possibility for dialogue, for discussion: “I only take action for the improvement of educational conditions in Somalia; when you are educated you can dialogue with your neighbour” (12:35, 12:42, 12:67). He adds: “The main goal is not to remain silent, to improve, as long as there will be the possibility of discussion there will always be a possibility of improvement, that’s the main point, education [and] education is the way to fight these two big problems in Somalia—poverty and Al-Shabaab” (12:42). Gurey says, “The most important thing is to reason” (8:52), and Cilmi restates, “If you don’t have an adequate level of education you are in trouble, it can’t be easy” (14:140). Ayaan asserts, “I believe that education is a very important sector” (17:99) which is echoed by Liban: “People are tired of the current situation; we have to keep pursuing education as much as possible” (20:9). These quotes speak to the paramount importance of education. Faduma co-finances the setting up of

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<sup>190</sup> Hoehne (2010: 30), interview with Cali Cumar Boosir, Hargeysa, 18 December 2008

<sup>191</sup> Abdullahi (2017:7) speaking of contemporary Somali elites writes, “Non-Islamists elites are not necessarily secular, though they are also not Islamic activists”.

public schools and universities in her region of provenance. They all believe in education and its determining role.

In their understanding, as already mentioned, Education has to be public, free of charge, and secular,<sup>192</sup> as it used to be, as the members of the Italo-phone Somali diaspora sub-group have experienced it: such as during the AFIS, in post-independence Somalia, or during the period of Siad Barre. The attributes of this erstwhile type of education plays into their motivation of going back and give back what they have mainly received in terms of educational opportunities.

As shown in the preceding Chapters, a certain set of values are transmitted, taught, learned, discussed, and appreciated through education. In the first place Education, as appreciated by the Italo-phone Somali diaspora, is conducive to reasoning and rationality, it creates the conditions for dialogue. Secondly, Education underpins the faculty of interpretation, which is a major component of their religious and social change capital, as I have shown in Chapter 8. Thirdly, Education would be a way to restore Somaliness in the Somali society, to promote dignity and pride in contemporary Somalia, at a new crossroads between tradition and modernity. Finally, Education would be the proper site and tool for conveying several other values that are particularly dear to the members of the Italo-phone Somali diaspora, and which are somehow subsumed by the core values above. I have touched upon these values in the course of this work, on various occasions, while discussing this or that topic.

Here, I propose a narrower selection of them, accompanied by a few quotes to indicate how my interviewees have framed them.

### *Diversity, Difference, and Otherness*

On this point, my interviews often touch upon the coexistence of different opinions, stances, and religions as lived and as desirable experience. Cumar discusses the importance of (1:44) “the dialogue with the different, to open up the mind of the youngsters, towards the future, the knowledge”. Amiin, venturing in a precipitous anthropological analysis, makes anyhow an important point:

The habit of all African is to make their idea prevail, to make their interlocutor forcibly accept their point of view and surrender... voilà, this is not necessary, I express my idea, you yours,

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<sup>192</sup> Most of my interviewees would endorse a form of ‘non-Islamist’ religious education in the sense put forward by Abdhullahi (see footnote no. 194)—namely, where religious teachings form part of a wider secular curriculum.

and that's it, it is not necessary that they coincide, that mine becomes yours [...] this is what I have learned over here (9:44).

Guuleed refers to his biography, stating: "I also had Italian friends, we used to discuss about everything, as long as this principle was respected: I will not try to convert you, and you will not try to convert me. This helped me not to feel attacked, personally or religiously" (10:124). Uba does the same, drawing from her own experience "Once there was tolerance, my children are catholic, I am Muslim; I taught them to respect all religions" (24:25).

### *Friendship*

My interlocutors mention how friendship can overcome clan pressure, as is the case for many Somalis who have a shared experience in their background. It is so for Absimil, for instance, who says he has contacts beyond his clan of belonging:

[I socialize] with friends I know very well; people I have been spending time with for a long time; people I met in school—they are from various clans. When you meet someone with whom you were in school or you were colleagues at work, you rejoice at it. In this sense, there is no limit to clan belonging (6:31).

Gurey, commenting on his clan-resistant group of friends explain that "we have been together in school, elbow-to-elbow" (8:29). Daahir says "I don't give too much importance to the clan, my friends who are university, school, or neighbour mates are also \*\*\* [the name of a clan], and I have no problem with them" (12:19). Schooling and education in general, can work as a source of friendship that can be genuinely trans-clanic and overcome the test of time.

### *Self-reliance, Self-esteem, and Self-confidence*

"Our land is rich, very rich; we are only lacking in trust in ourselves, in our resources" says Bilal (7:28). Gurey looks in the same direction when stating, "I would like the country to progress in a direction which might lead to self-reliance in the future" (8:56). The same value and goal inspires Hodan who says:

Somalia is a beautiful country, the only thing is that we have to work, and he or she who wishes to work must be allowed to [...]; we have to change the people; we have to teach them

not to ask, we do not need help, enough with tears. Our land is rich, it suffices to seed something and we can harvest more than once a year [...]; but people have become accustomed to asking for handouts when they only need to work instead—we have the resources, a huge sea (11:6, 16)

As noted throughout the thesis, two different principles are confronting each other at individual and social level in Somalia and among the Italoophone Somali diaspora. Individualism and communitarianism, the reasoning of the (isolated) human being taken individually, in his or her quest for freedom, self-reliance, and independence of thought, and the reasons of the group, the need for protection, the power of the forms of social control, the fear of the sanction. The Italoophone Somali diaspora seem to live at the crossroads of these two approaches. They attempt a compromise, where *Somaliness*—the proverbial “unbounded love for individual freedom”, and the “aversion to people who claim to rule over them” (Laitin 1977: 27, 35)—is reconciled with Tradition and modernity.

## **Challenges to the Research and Research Challenges**

As much as it is neglected sometimes in practice, education is held out in rhetoric as a strategically vital sector for any country. It is so in the Somali context, and as I have shown in the course of this work, from an Italoophone Somali diaspora perspective. This sub-group of people, within the Somali diaspora, has a precise and well-developed understanding of education and of how it should be re-organized in practice.

A crucial point, though, is represented by the fact that this ‘idea’ cannot be considered representative outside the Italoophone Somali diaspora population. If many agree, at scholarly level and in the classroom, in the educational establishments as well as within the society, on the paramount role to be assigned to education, very few agree on how to implement such a principle in practice. At scholarly level, just to give an example, Elmi talks about “Peacebuilding Education” (2010: 108–127), and advocates for a form of education meant to promote Somali national identity, which is “very thin in Somalia”, as he puts it, and it is not linked to “any meaningful indigenous education system”. Within this context, and against the meddling in the Somali affairs of Western organizations and the international community alike, which “have negative perceptions about the Islamists who dominate the few educational institutions that exist in Somalia”, Elmi recommends a form of national education. This would rely on “citizenship education”, “peace education”, and “peacebuilding

education” and be compliant with Islamic values and culture, which are very inclusive. Abdi instead (1998, 2008a) puts forward a different understanding. Concerned with assuring access to education to all and educational reconstruction in Somalia, he is rather preoccupied, within a more secular tradition, to alleviate the pervasive impact of globalization in the realm of education, and to decolonize it. He writes (2008: 5) “development education is formal school-based, and requires already agreed-upon skills that pertain to the dominant project of modernity where tests, credentialization and accreditation are the *sine qua non* for employment and liquidity”. Abdhullahi is the bearer of yet another stance (2008). He seems to favour a form of Islamic education that is more linked to the experience of Al-Islah, the Muslim Brotherhood in Somalia, and their civil Islamism experience.

All these takes on Education are in one way or another different from the position of the Italoophone Somali diaspora. In the section on “Education Today”, within Chapter 4, I have compared the system currently in place in the country with that of the pre-civil war period, which the members of my sample have experienced and nostalgically remember. One of the main challenges posed by the outputs of this research derives exactly from this. How representative are the members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora for the Somali society more generally? How peculiar is their understanding of the Somali social institutions, of the forms of social control, and of social change ahead? Does it reflect their belonging to a particular sub-group, or is it somehow transversal and extendable instead to other sections of the Somali society? It is not just a matter of generalisability to my sub-group, it is a matter of inquiring the real stances of the people well beyond my target population.

A few hurdles though impede the full appreciation of the Somali society’s views in this respect. In the first place the pervasive state of fear and isolation that affects many Italoophone Somalis. They cosmetically adhere to the rules of the community, while privately or intimately they often deviate from the prescribed code of conduct. This state of impasse and silent acquiescence prevents them from realizing how much popular (or not) actually are their stances, how much shared are their grievances, how much diffused their outlook. Piercing this bubble of angst that keeps each one member of the Italoophone Somali diaspora disjointed would be a first step towards gaining courage and legitimacy in the present. “Bisogna contare”<sup>193</sup> [“we must count how many we are”]– would be a way to take action to this end.

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<sup>193</sup> I borrow this expression from Gianni Mauro, who shared it during a discussion on the topic held in January 2018.

Secondly, another major impediment towards a proper assessment of the situation is represented by the salience of fear - in the various forms discussed in Chapter 7 - for other sections of the Somali populations. This is particularly true for what the Italoophone Somali call “the masses” as a target of their development communication. How much are they affected, if at all, by the same forms of social control? How much the clanic, the traditional, and the religious codes in force nowadays in Somalia are de facto aligned with the real stances and preferences of the people? What and how dominant is their interpretation of the religious message? How many, and how peculiar are they? Do they reflect more the dispositions and the admonitions of the ruling elite or are they signalled by spontaneous and free choices? In other words, if and how distant is the public conduct from the private belief? All this would require a number of other investigations, which for sure would be worth the effort.

In a ideal world where the coexistence of different and sometimes opposing views is guaranteed as a value per se, a third, fundamental step forward would be to make them dialogue with each other, towards finding a common ground or just a form of mutual respect. All possible interpreters of the various codes should ideally convene around a same physical or moral table to discuss a common way ahead, or to give full implementation, alone by gathering together, to the principle of tolerance. As long as this is not viable, social change as understood by the Italoophone Somali diaspora sub-group is very unlikely to be sparked.

Another implication of the research concerns the role of positionality in the promotion of change. I noted myself in the many interactions with members of the Italoophone Somali diaspora a recurring aloofness, perhaps even condescension, toward what they call “the Masses” in Somalia. This must surely itself constitute a major obstacle. In reason of their claimed social change capital, my interviewees indulge sometimes, I maintain, in self-referential stances, which prevent them from ‘seeing’ or taking advantage of actual opportunities on the ground. Their nostalgic idealization of the “good old times” does not ease the process either. If they want to regain legitimacy in the eyes of those back home, they might need to accept that over the years things have changed in Somalia, and the Somalis too.

One final challenge posed by the research is the question of reflexivity. As discussed in chapter 3 on methodology, I have adopted an approach in the data collection and analysis phase that is conversant with ethnography, on the one hand, and the main tenets of Grounded Theory on the other. I did not anticipate that I would end up conducting research on the main social institutions governing Somalia and the public conduct of Somali people. With this renewed focus, I hope to have

managed to set aside my assumptions about the Somali context and to analyse my data accordingly. However, the effect of my presence on the quality and the extent of the data collected remains imponderable. The language proximity between my interviewees and me might have had an impact on the data exchanged and collected. Undoubtedly, Italian has worked as a cultural bridge and language “of familiarity”. Being a sign of distinction, pride, and cultural capital for the population here under investigation, communicating in Italian might have entailed, in some cases, the instrumental assimilation of the foreign culture it represents. The potential implications of this, in terms of traditional and modern values, adopted or just claimed, can be far reaching. The question, in other words, is whether my sub-group of interviewees would have replied in different ways to the same questions had the research been conducted in say Somali or Arabic, as Laitin’s (1977) seminal study would suggest. At the same time, however, the Italian language has undeniably represented a nostalgic memory trigger, and by virtue of the cultural proximity recalled above, it may have constituted an authentic entry point to a certain sphere of trust, for issues and concerns (notably the religious aspects) that otherwise would have remained submerged in a diffused state of fear and conformism. As a language of trust, Italian might therefore have affected the research findings.

Research challenges and the challenges to the present research, as sketched above, are full of implications for the potential use of the present study’s findings. Undoubtedly, they call for further investigation on the one hand, and for political and social action, on the other. For sure, however, education has moved to the forefront as a crucial dimension in social change. Whomever controls it today in Somalia has a certain understanding of the world inside and beyond the Somali context, and thus, of the civil and religious codes that the Somali society should abide by.

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# Annex I

## Interview Guide

1. How do you envisage social change/advancement/development/*Harumarinta* in Somalia? In what direction would you like the country to progress? From what point of view (political, economic, social, cultural, religious, etc...)? Have you got a specific idea or preferred model in these domains?
2. Based on your *diasporic* experience, your background, and your professional activities, how do you contribute to this idea of social change (from above)?
  - a. Are there messages, ideas, values you seek to convey? Towards meeting what goals?
  - b. How do you communicate these messages, through what channels and tools?
  - c. Who are your interlocutors and your target audience more in general? And how do you reach out to them (if there is a way...)? do they change based on your message?
3. Towards achieving these goals, what are the major challenges you are confronted with? And from what perspective (social, economic, cultural, religious, etc.)?
  - d. How do you try to cope with these challenges? Showing or not showing what? Saying or not saying what? Asking or not asking what?
  - e. How would you deal with these challenges, or overcome them, if you had other means and (economic) resources at your disposal?
4. How are you perceived from the locals? Do you need to pay attention to what you say and do under certain circumstances? If yes, why?
5. Do you think that having lived in the Diaspora, and more in particular in a Western context, plays a role in determining the quality and the quantity of your 'engagement' towards your home country? If yes, why?