

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Manhood, money and survival: rethinking child soldiers in Somalia

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Abstract

Somalia today stands as one of the most persistent contexts of child soldier recruitment and use globally. The emergence of the Islamic militant group Al Shabaab has intensified fears about the insecurity of – and threat posed by – children as agents of war in Somalia. This article contextualises Al-Shabaab's recruitment and use of children within its specific historical, political and cultural dimensions, challenging the emphasis in terrorism studies on the 'unique' phenomenon of children in extremist groups and relating the pathways of youth in Al-Shabaab with wider trends in criminality and violence, including piracy. This research responds to the need for deeper analysis of Somalia's history of youth mobilisation that considers the specific constructions of age and masculinity that have influenced the participation of young people in diverse armed groups.

Keywords: Somalia; child soldiers; militarization; Al-Shabaab; masculinity

Somalia today stands as one of the most persistent contexts of child soldier recruitment and use globally. After the fall of Siad Barre's government in 1991 and the ensuing protracted civil war, Child Soldiers International estimated 200,000 Somali children had been associated with an armed group or carried a gun at some point in their lives (Child Soldiers Global Report, 2004). In international media, images of 'stoned teenagers' cruising Mogadishu on jeeps mounted with machine guns became synonymous with the construction of Somalia as a 'chaotic African country' (Stewart 2003) in which one could be killed for nothing more than 'the clothes on your back' (*New York Times*, 1992). The emergence of the Islamist militant group Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen in 2003, otherwise known as Al-Shabaab or 'the youth' in Arabic, intensified fears about the insecurity of – and threat posed by – children as agents of war in

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Somalia. Openly recruiting Somali boys and some girls, Al-Shabaab's prolific use of children sparked intense debate about the potential long-term consequences of children associated with extremist groups as indefinite sources of violence and instability (O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven 2018).

Somalia's strategic position along the Gulf of Aden and its reputation as the locus of militant Islamism in East Africa have drawn significant scholarly and political attention to its status as a 'failed state' and to its relationship to other Islamist extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda. Depicted in media and policy as largely anarchistic and a breeding ground for extremism, the vast literature on conflict in post-Barre Somalia has attended to security concerns, lessons learned for military humanitarian operations and counterterrorism (Kaptejins 2013; Gelot and Hansen 2019). Yet, as argued by Judy El-Bushra and Judith Gardner, 'the reality is that the Somali territories present a diverse conflict landscape with a wide spectrum of peace and conflict experiences' (El-Bushra and Gardner 2016). This article responds to the need for a deeper analysis of Somalia's history of youth mobilisation by situating young people's participation in armed groups within longer patterns of social and religious militancy and specific constructions of age and masculinity. It aims to deconstruct racial and Islamophobic narratives of children associated with armed groups in Somalia by examining the broader historical context of young people's violent labour. The central argument put forward here is that youth participation in armed groups in Somalia has been modulated through a complex interplay between money, survival and manhood, which together have shaped the varied pathways of Somali youth in conflict.

The article begins by tracing the historical foundations of youth militarism developed through claniship social and defence structures. It then examines the diverse experiences of armed youth during the height of civil war in Mogadishu and surrounding areas, challenging homogenised, reductionist narratives of violent and drug-using teenagers. The final section situates Al-Shabaab's recruitment and use of children within its specific historical, political and cultural dimensions, linking youth militancy with wider patterns of criminality, labour and aspirations of social belonging. In doing so, this research asks how we can rethink the diversity of militarism for young men and boys, for whom militarisation is both an opportunity and a rational survival choice.

This research is a multi-method qualitative study, drawing primarily from ten life history interviews with former child soldiers and demobilisation and reintegration practitioners conducted by this author via phone and video link platforms in 2024 and 2025. Seven interviews were conducted in English, and three were supported by an interpreter in Somali. Given the paucity of published documents and archival material on local experiences of conflict, life histories are the most valuable source of evidence to access counternarratives of war and violence in Somalia. These original interviews are augmented by pre-colonial and colonial literature on Somalia's claniship structure, with reference to primordial and instrumentalist debates in extant literature and to contemporary humanitarian reports. This work is part of a wider research project on comparative histories of child soldiering in Africa 1940–2000, which

develops a historical understanding of the construction of the ‘child soldier crisis’ that exploded onto the humanitarian agenda after 1990 (see Hynd 2021).

Narrating the Somali ‘child soldier’

Despite the ‘equivalence of lives and equivalence of suffering’ institutionalised in global human-rights frameworks post-Geneva Convention, the reality of humanitarian sensibility is the fact that donors deem some recipients to be more worthy of ‘saving’ than others (Mamdani 2010). This is perhaps best expressed through Judith Butler’s concept of ‘precarious lives’, where there exist ‘versions of populations who are eminently grievable, and others whose loss is no loss and remain ungrievable’ (Butler 2009). The emergence of a global security-development nexus in the early 1990s positioned children in fragile states ‘as risk’ and ‘at risk’: in other words, relating humanitarian efforts to protect children with concerns about the potential threat posed by security failures in the Global South to the rest of the world (Ansell et al. 2019). In this lens, managing ‘dangerous children’ was as much a question of future international security as a regional development concern (Tabak 2020). Lives that were deemed to represent a threat to the dominant world order in the Global North became inherently ungrievable – igniting fear over compassion, in need of containment over development. United States troops arrived in Somalia in 1992, planning to swiftly secure the flow of humanitarian relief disrupted by civil war violence, only to confront a complex landscape in which the expected recipients of aid (children, refugees, famine victims, minority groups) were simultaneously agents of conflict. The category of Somali children shifted quickly from icons to suffering to sources of instability in international media that claimed:

Somali children know as much about weapons as Western children know about computer games. General Ibrahim Mohamed, who heads a peace committee of neutral clans, says the young fighters ‘have no human feeling; there is complete anarchy, they are out of control’. (*The Economic*, 22.02.1992)

Elsewhere on the continent, the seeming upsurge of armed children in the ‘new wars’ of the 1990s brought with it the idea that child soldiers had been ‘robbed of childhood’ through their engagement in adult realms of violence and conflict (Tabak 2020). The ‘Lost Boys of Sudan’, recruited into the child militia Jesh Al-Ahmer (Berger 2022), and the children abducted into the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda, for example, drew mass media attention and public sympathy on the grounds of forced recruitment and exploitation. Their childhood was narrated as temporarily lost, stolen by adult commanders but recoverable through humanitarian intervention. In Somalia, however, the dominant narrative that emerged in global reporting was that these were in fact not lost childhoods but wrong childhoods. While the visibility of armed children in Sudan, Uganda, Liberia and Sierra Leone did inspire anxiety about the potentially destabilising impact of child soldiers in the long term, Somali youths were consistently awarded a finer degree of agency that qualified their actions as delinquent, deliberate and a threat to international order (UNICEF 2009).

They were not positioned as casualties of war, enmeshed in struggles for survival, but culpable agents whose participation confirmed rather than transgressed their culturally constructed trajectories of masculinity and militancy. There are a few notable reasons for this shallow effort to attend to the lived realities of youth violence in Somalia. For one, the undeniable racial and religious dimension, where Western fear of Islam collided with the humanitarian tradition of 'saving' Black Africa. For another, ongoing conflict has prevented sustained ethnographic research to challenge reductive, sensationalised media narratives. But, in the context of Somalia as a critical site of global securitisation development, it is worth also considering how direct military humanitarian intervention in the theatrically titled 'Operation Restore Hope' and its later formations forced direct confrontation between international norms of children, childhoods and violence with local Somali realities. Jana Tabak writes, 'In the absence of a valid criterion across cultures of what a happy and normal childhood is, the decision about where to draw the line between "right" and "wrong" childhoods is always a political one' (Tabak 2020). The homogenous Somali (male) 'child soldier' was formed at the clash of un/acceptable childhoods with the developing politics of human security as global security (Nordstrom's Un/Acceptable War Stories; Nordstrom 2004).

Compounding the dearth of social-historical research on conflict in Somalia is the emphasis in terrorism studies on the allegedly unprecedented phenomenon of armed children in extremist groups, which has obscured historical patterns of child mobilisation and militarisation (O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven 2018). Existing literature on non-state armed groups labelled as terrorist or jihadist perpetuates the idea that these types of conflict are 'markedly different' and require unique policy and programmatic responses (Bloom and Horgan 2019). After the events of 9/11, historians have found (almost) no place in terrorism studies, which were dominated by a 'de-historicized approach' that emphasised the supposedly 'new' nature and challenges of armed extremist groups (Ceci 2016). This research joins the growing call for more historical work on terrorism that moves beyond the post-9/11 era and meaningfully contributes to terrorism discourse and a knowledge of longer histories of violence and patterns, trends or influences on different manifestations of violent extremism (Millington 2024; Livesey 2021). While Al-Shabaab is frequently positioned as an extension of Islamist militarism in Syria and Iraq, this article maps the longer history and specific Somali character of the militant group that aligns more closely with other manifestations of organised violent crime than that of the Islamic State or Al Qaeda. Viewed in conjunction with the contribution of varied literature on child soldiers, youth and securitisation studies, these findings challenge the outdated notion that ideology is the primary driver of participation in extremist groups, identifying rather the push and pull of dynamic historical and cultural experiences of conflict, childhoods, masculinity, social mobility, protection and opportunity.

Pervasive security concerns continue to dominate discourse on Somalia's child soldiers, sharpened post 9/11 and the emergence of counterterrorism funding into child-centred humanitarian work. In Somalia today, children formerly associated with Al-Shabaab are approached as extremist militants and

a security threat first and a protected category of child second. One interviewee revealed it can take up to a year for designated 'high risk' children to be reintegrated, while humanitarian reports document the prosecution of young people under adult terrorism legislation (Human Rights Watch 2018). One former senior advisor to UNICEF explained:

CW: [On reintegrating children in Somalia] It was challenging. People were worried that they were sleeper cells . . . [religious extremism] makes it difficult because you'll always be a suspect. Whereas if we now go back to Sierra Leone, or you go to northern Uganda or you go to Sri Lanka, nobody looks at these children as sleeper cells. It makes it more complex . . . These were freedom fighters who were patriotic, and then after that, these were predatory wars. If you look at the narrative, you'll find out actually [that] children were fighting for the same thing.

This article takes up the task presented by this participant: to identify the patterns and pathways of Somali youth militarisation, producing a counter-narrative to accusations of religious extremism and barbarism that have underlined literature and policy approaches to Somali children associated with armed groups.

Childhood, Islam and militarisation in Somali history

There is a long-standing analytical tension in Somali studies between primordialist and instrumentalist approaches to clanship. In the former, the clan system is a fundamental organising principle in society, led by elders who play governance, judicial and conflict resolution roles. For anthropologist I.M. Lewis (1972) states that the clan is 'identity and destiny', directing where members live, work, who they marry, who they ally with and who they fight. The four major clan families, Darood, Isaaq, Hawiye and Dir, are traditionally nomadic pastoralists. Rahanweyn, the fifth major clan, is comprised of the Digil and Mirifle lineages, agro-pastoralists who have historically been politically marginalised (Gardener and El Bushra 2004). Others have diversified this approach, identifying that the nature of clanship is not unchanging nor evenly experienced across Somalia (Samatar 1989; Cassanelli 1982; Cassanelli 2011). Building on this interpretation, I join Roland Marchal (2018) in recognising that clan, religion and youth identity in Somalia interact dynamically, at once historically embedded and strategically mobilised. It is within this framework that I approach militarism and militarisation in Somalia as intersecting and relational processes. Militarism here refers to the valorisation of martial capacity, embedding *waranle* (warrior) status within male socialisation and kinship structures. Militarisation, however, describes the institutionalisation of martial values in everyday life: the process by which male responsibility for violence was mobilised to draw support for organised standing militias. Drawing on feminist and sociological theorising that blurs the distinction between conflict and conflict preparation (Enloe 2000; Cockburn 2010), militarism in Somalia emerges not as a discrete wartime phenomenon but as a social logic embedded in kinship, identity and gender relations.

There was no standing clan militia in Somalia until as late as 1970. Rather, each sub-clan produced its own irregular armed group and reactive raiding parties to contest rival clans through the *diya* system: the mutually agreed obligation (*xeer*, oral contract) to pay and receive damages to another *diya* paying group in the event of theft, rape, injury or death (Pham 2013). If the agreed monetary or livestock value was not paid, the victim's community was entitled to enact violence against the perpetrator (Goldsmith 1959; Burton 1856). What is crucial about the *diya* system for this research is the tradition of calling up potential 'warriors' from within the scorned *diya* group, escalated through the sub-clan and broader clan family if the fighting spread. According to Lewis, '[in cases of] rapidly escalating hostilities, where group identities were constantly being enlarged as the more inclusive levels of lineage patriotism became involved, whole clans would eventually be mobilised to defend their component lineages against their foes' (Lewis 1972). In Somali tradition, 'all Somali males were considered potential warriors' (Metz 1992). A 'culture of military readiness' thrived through the clan structure where *waranle* (male warriors) could be mobilised at any stage by elders and extended families (Metz 1992).

Boys' maturation pathways in pre-colonial Somalia varied across clans, including mixed approaches to circumcision, marriage and household labour (El-Bushra and Gardner 2016; Gardner and El-Bushra 2004). Militancy, however, was a consistent indicator of *raganimo* (manhood) and a core element of childhood in nomadic pastoral culture. Burton identified that children around the age of seven or eight would be 'provided with a small spear', learning by copying the examples of older boys and men who were all *waranle* (or *warnleh*), except for those who become *wadaad*, religious men (Burton 1856). The ad hoc formation of militias and raiding parties meant there was little in the way of formal training processes; rather, there was an institutionalised approach to military preparedness that was a part of 'everyday life' and the 'proper pursuit' of emerging young men (Lewis 1999). The capacity to perform violence as a duty and service to one's clan was a hallmark of the liminal transition from child to youth in a landscape where intermittent conflict shaped norms of age and maturation. Pre-colonial Somali orientation towards armed conflict as a potential pathway for all young males has parallels with observations made by Hoffman in West Africa that sociality itself was organised around making young men available for violent labour (Hoffman 2011). For Somali males, prestige in battle or raiding was hard won, but it brought greater influence in council meetings and the potential to marry the most desirable women (Metz 1992). Indeed, fatherhood and family leadership went hand in hand with militancy to achieve *raganimo*, formed at the intersections of strength, household leadership and reproduction.

Yet, *raganimo* is not static, nor uniformly performed across Somali communities. It is historically forged and deeply relational, gaining meaning through its contrast and interdependence with Somali womanhood. As gender scholars and anthropologists have shown, Somali womanhood has been constructed unevenly through conflict, modernity and the push and pull of idealised *gabar xishood leh*, female modesty (Hashi 2016; Wambua 2017). It both tempers and legitimates *raganimo*, which El Bushra and Gardener claim is in

large part judged through men's relationships with (and by) women (2016). Over time, protracted conflict and displacement have unsettled these gendered balances. Women's increasing economic and political visibility, including their participation in clan negotiations, market trade and occasionally in armed mobilisation or support roles, has reconfigured the boundaries of *raganimo*. Changing war economies have enabled women to occupy spaces once reserved for men, challenging assumptions of female dependency while simultaneously provoking anxieties about male authority and social order.

El-Bushra and Gardner cite a Somali proverb that warns, '*raganimo* is like your footprints which are wiped out by the rain' (El-Bushra and Gardener 2016). The temporality and fragility of Somali manhood, they argue, require maintaining, else it can be diminished or lost entirely. The advent of colonialism and political fragmentation of Somalia after 1898 threatened established hierarchies, relationships and (gendered) identities upon which Somali society had hinged (Adamu 2009). While Lewis and others contend that clan membership intensified in response to external influence, anti-colonial militant movements arose that transcended clan-level allegiance and offered new opportunities for Somali youth to challenge the threat of colonial rule to African masculinities.

The emergence of militant Islamism in Somalia is often treated as a by-product of 'new wars' and an extension of contemporary extremism in the Middle East, but the militarisation of Sunni Islam can be traced back a hundred years before the birth of the Islamic Courts and Al-Shabaab in Somalia (Harper 2012). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, East African Islam spread 'from Zeyla to Zanzibar' in the form of Sufi brotherhoods such as the Qadiriyya and Ahmadiyya orders (Samatar 2010). Initially organised as non-political religious centres that cut across clan ties to emphasise religious brotherhood over genealogical kinship, *turuq* (Sufi religious orders) adapted during colonial imposition to provide a militarised political alternative to foreign rule. The strongest example of this is the rise of the anti-colonial Dervish movement under Mohamed Abdullah Hassan, known to the British as 'the mad Mullah'. Hassan mobilised the Saalihiya brotherhood into an armed Islamist resistance force, denouncing clan political allegiances in favour of a centralised religious calling to reject 'Christian colonisers' (Samatar 2010; Samatar 1989). The Dervish State grew rapidly in both popularity and influence after the turn of the century, drawing roughly 6000 'youth' from all clans during a twenty-year campaign (Abdi 2022). Presented as the distinctly Somali alternative to preserve *raganimo* as it intersected with Islamic religious adherence and cultural nationalism, Hassan's Dervish movement attracted widespread support from all ages and genders before its eventual defeat by British airstrikes in 1920. Many 'children' in the contemporary legal sense served within the armed cohort of militant Dervish brothers, identified variously as 'tent boys', 'youngsters' and 'scouts' in colonial writings (Jardine 1923). One such entry in a British military report noted a 'very small boy' taken prisoner who had been supporting a captured Dervish fort (The National Archives 1937). It is not possible to be specific about the average age of Dervish militia beyond colonial agreements that they were primarily 'youth' – a highly ambiguous category encompassing

anything from early teens to late twenties – but it is worth emphasising here that in the Shafi'i madhab followed in Somalia, the age of adulthood is fifteen; hence, it was not unusual for adolescents of this demographic to be considered full fighting age males.

The fall of the Dervish State brought with it the decline of coordinated religious militarism, but not of youth political activism. The formation of the Somali Youth Club in 1943, later to become the major political party Somali Youth League, was heavily influenced by the campaigns of Hassan and other anti-colonial religious militants (Harper 2012). In the face of transitional political uncertainty after the creation of the Somali Republic in 1960, clanship was reinvigorated to provide a familiar structural security against the unification of divergent territories. When Siad Barre claimed power in a coup d'état in 1969, the new Somali Democratic Republic encouraged the formation of a middle-class urban elite to carry out Barre's Scientific Socialism, which in turn rendered further to the periphery rural pastoralists who maintained traditional migration, marriage and labour patterns. Dwindling international support for Barre towards the end of the Cold War was channelled through the clans, who reaped the benefits of an influx of money and armaments from the United States and Ethiopia (Metz 1992; Lewis 2002). By the mid-1980s, Somalia was primed for internal conflict. Somalis navigating drought and shortages amid Barre's unequal distribution of resources found themselves with readily available access to weapons, administered through a clan structure that endorsed divisions between groups and legitimised violence in the name of lineage and identity. How this came to encompass so many young people is explored in the following element of this article.

The militarisation and recruitment of children in Somalia's civil war (1988–1992)

All these young people, the teenagers who come, have the guns, and, you know, they just do what they want. They have no conscience. They don't care whether they die. They chew this, what they call khat. That's what they fight for. They think they will get maybe less than a cent, and to get it from you, they will kill you. They don't care. (Interview with Hared, quoted in the Somali Skyline Tower Oral History Project).

This construction of the archetypal 'boy child soldier' of Somalia's civil war needs to be examined in the context of a social-historical analysis that interrogates how far it really applies to the reality encountered within the diverse armed youth engaged in this complex conflict. Life stories of youth in clan militaries, religious groups and private militias need to be better disaggregated in order to understand exactly who, when and why young people took up arms in this tumultuous period in Somali history. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that the final years of Barre's regime were characterised by building a culture of militarism at every level, including military training courses in schools and colleges (Adam 1992). Readily distributing armaments and encouraging 'profound distrust' between clans who opposed him, Barre created a heavily militarised landscape in which the traditional pastoralist

practice of ad hoc mobilisation of youth extended to newly formed standing clan militaries (Compagnon 1998). Adversary groups such as the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), Somali National Movement (SNM), United Somali Congress (USC) and Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM) formed out of clan allegiances, conscripting members from all layers of society, including from refugee camps. The SNM in the north of the country recalled lineage members from camps in Ethiopia to their ranks, most of whom had no formal education and had been unemployed before joining the military (Compagnon 1998). According to Anthony Vinci, 'the council of clan elders will send representatives to each family's house looking for young men to serve. There is no history of forced conscription in Somalia . . . they will likely already be armed or have been mobilised before as part of a standby militia' (Vinci 2006). The rise of violence ahead of the fall of Barre in 1991 mobilised clan identity as a political resource, to be moulded and weaponised beyond precedent to topple Barre's administration. Once this was achieved, the vacuum of power opened new opportunities for clan extension and dominance.

The conflict spiralled in a matter of weeks as groups capitalised on the absence of a national army and police force, vying for control of strategic infrastructure in cities and key coastal ports. One Somali youth quoted in UNICEF's 10-year strategic review of Graça Machel's 1996 study of the impact of armed conflict on children explained:

We were mobilised by our clan militia heads to come to the playground. All of us were young people about the same age. They told us to defend our village. We were in the queue with our guns. When the Marehan clan attacked us, we defended our village. (UNICEF 10-Year Strategic Review 2009)

Kapteijns, however, has criticised the Lewisian emphasis on clanship in this climate of civil war violence, writing, 'Clan is both too broad and too narrow a concept to justify an interpretation of this episode of violence . . . Many of those who happened to be members of these clans or this clan family did not want anything to do with this violence' (Kapteijns 2011). Up to 800,000 Somalis fled to Kenya and Ethiopia in 1992, escaping both armed conflict and severe drought (Hammond 2014). The lives of those who rejected clan violence and the extended call to arms point to the evolution of the structure and nature of clan membership and a growing association between militancy and survival. To put it another way, clan identity after the fall of Barre should not be viewed as a homogenous set of values and shared ambition but as a malleable performance of identity to be shaped by those Compagnon calls 'political entrepreneurs' (Compagnon 1998). These encompassed a diverse set of actors, ranging from clan elders who adopted the title *abbaanduul*, formerly reserved for battle leaders, to wealthy individuals able to finance their own subdivision of clan-associated militia through lineage (Pham 2013). These actors drew from the language of clanship solidarity to deepen divisions between groups, offering opportunity and employment to vulnerable members of Somali society. As the violence escalated, the changing nature of clanship drove the recruitment of 'children' in the contemporary legal sense in order to augment associated militias facing a diminishing population affected by famine, death and mass displacement. Compared to earlier patterns of clan violence and labour as an

irregular service and indicator of masculinity and maturity, civil war demanded the mobilisation of more, and inevitably younger, recruits. In the words of one former civil war participant interviewed via an encrypted messaging service:

OP: My father was killed in the fighting. My mother left with my younger siblings to a refugee camp. I joined the fighting.

Another participant working with the Somali government to reintegrate children associated with armed groups explained:

KJ: The main reasons for recruiting children [in the civil war] were issues related to the famine. Families could not help their own children. There was no work. If they work for militias, they get rations. Sometimes they work at the roadblocks. Children would use these to stop cars and take the money for the food. Options for children during the war were very low. They could starve, do hard labour or join the militias.

When civilianised conflict breaks down the distinction between combatant and civilian lives and their field of choices, 'it can be virtually impossible for children to remain unaffiliated with a party to a conflict' (O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven 2018). When extended clan families are both the source of protection and of violence, militarisation can be the best option for survival and security. Differentiating militarised children from adults in this scenario does not aptly reflect the decisions children and adults alike must navigate in a warscape. Equally, when opposition clans assume that all visibly fighting-age males are naturally members of the militia, abstaining from violence is not a viable or realistic option. Compagnon describes the violent pursuit of any identifiable members of the Daarood people for the supportive role played in Barre's regime as a 'witch-hunt... [where they would be] shot on the spot without trial' (Compagnon 1998). In this climate, if the choices facing young clan members are death, displacement or militarisation, it is not difficult to understand why so many young people took up arms through clan-associated groups. In the context of *raganimo*, militarisation directly supported Somali constructions of male strength and household protection, shifting historical practices of *diya* to a new mode of clan warriorship.

After the fall of Barre in 1991, the demobilisation of young warriors presented a challenge to clan militias who could neither pay a standing army nor support the reintegration of surplus forces. In this landscape, combatants formerly associated with clan militaries settled in cities, blurring the distinction between clan-affiliated rebels and *mooryan*, independent militia known for illicit activities (Compagnon 1998). Mogadishu became the epicentre of this violence by the end of 1992, where clan dominance was highly contested and opportunities for financial gain were highest. Clan identity provided the guise through which armed young men could access unprecedented wealth and influence, evolving from the existing fabric of clan social structure into a new form of identity politics. Alongside clan-associated militaries, at least three other distinct types of militias emerged in this space: armed groups employed by businesses and/or NGOs, 'personal armies' for private individuals ('warlords') and Islamist militias (Vinci 2006). Differentiating the types of armed groups active in Mogadishu at this time allows us to better capture the range of lives and experiences that existed in this warscape, most of whom do

not necessarily align with the emblematic Somali soldier, for whom Mary Harper claims that ‘a weapon seemed as essential as a shirt, more vital than a pair of shoes’ (Harper 2012). The question addressed here is not whether this statement is true, at least in Mogadishu, but rather how can we better understand the diversity of militarism for young men and boys at this time, for whom militarisation was an opportunity and a necessary survival choice?

For example, the growth of militant Islamist groups like Al-Itixaad can be traced in part to the unemployment of urban and educated youth, formerly public-sector workers or students under Barre’s socialist state, specifically recruited by the religious group who presented as an alternative to clan-war (Marchal 2004). Al-Islax began as an Islamic NGO supporting orphanages, schools and health centres and militarising during the civil war in a telling depiction of the close relationship between welfare, security and armament as hostilities spiralled. Kapteijns identifies the distinct influence of poor, unaccompanied men from ‘the slums of the ever-growing capital city... [who held] a huge grudge against more comfortably off city people’ (Kapteijns 2011). This demographic of independent youth was primarily responsible for the extensive and violent looting that took place in Mogadishu in 1991–1992. The existence of *mooryan* complicates the dominance of clanship violence in the city, indicating the ‘class and rural-urban antagonisms that played a role in the dynamics of violence at that moment, as well as particular enactments of masculinity’ (Kapteijns 2011). Moving beyond the clan narrative through these life histories adds a valuable dimension to understanding the diverse pathways and experiences of civil war violence in Somalia.

The following exchange is an excerpt from an interview I conducted with a local humanitarian practitioner, currently working to facilitate the reintegration of children formerly associated with Al-Shabaab. In our discussion about the history of Somali youth in war, this participant shared that they had themselves been militarised in their youth, although they did not identify with the term ‘child soldier’, which in their view only applied to those associated with clan militias.

AM: I was maybe twelve when I came to Mogadishu. We lived with some family. Things were very dangerous. Street fighting, that sort of thing. So you have to get protection. After some time, one of my friends starting working for a businessman who wanted protection. My friend said, ‘Come with me, you can get a little bit of money and help your family’. So I did, maybe I was thirteen. We are given some guns and we are told to watch this place or that place. I did it for some short time, not very long. I was never involved in any fighting like that, no violence or anything. But lots of other young people, my same age – so much violence, you know, at that time...

FB: Why did so many young people become involved in the fighting?

AM: For money sometimes, getting paid something. And for staying alive, being with a group or being in a position to protect yourself and anyone else. People say about Somalia, ‘oh they’ll kill for your shirt, they’re so crazy’. I don’t think that is fair, even at that time when it was so dangerous, you cannot imagine. You just want to stay alive, maybe make some money for yourself and your family even... And if you are not able to take care of yourself, you are

scared or hide, whatever. So the ones who are involved in that, I think it is sometimes a way to feel more powerful.

It is interesting to reflect on the question of who is and is not a child soldier through different lenses, given that this participant qualified his role as non-violent and therefore not a comparable experience to those in formal militias. According to the 2007 Paris Principles, a child associated with an armed force or armed group refers to anyone below the age of eighteen who has been recruited and used by an armed force/group in any capacity. This definition encompasses informants and armed protection work, regardless of direct participation in hostilities. The use of children as security or bodyguards is an underexplored phenomenon in the child soldier literature but emerges in Somalia as a distinct category where the practice of using children as literal shields was common (Miller and Moskos 1995). This participant configured his participation through the lens of survival and what Honwana (2006) terms tactical agency, which is the capacity of young people to act within highly constrained circumstances. In the distinctly liminal space of adolescence, the participant occupied an ambiguous position in which he was protected from the necessarily violent adult sphere of civil war in Mogadishu, able to mobilise specifically as an elder youth to perform a bodyguarding role on the fringes of conflict. In doing so, he challenges humanitarian and policy discourses that collapse diverse experiences of youth militarisation and deny specific youth subjectivities. Again, the implicit concept of *raganimo* arises as a reason why so many adolescents specifically were mobilised for violence. The participant distinguished between those who 'are scared or hide' and those who 'feel more powerful' when they could protect themselves by wielding a weapon. This differentiation aligns with El-Bushra and Gardener's argument that Somali masculinity is fragile and transitory, requiring an active claiming (El-Bushra and Gardener 2016). It also supports analyses of adolescent militarisation masculinity as aspirational, through which disempowered young men seek protection, recognition and belonging (Vigh 2006; Bjarnesen 2023).

Closely linked to the pursuit of masculinity are questions of agency, particularly around the issue of drug use. A great deal of discursive attention has been awarded to the prevalence and influence of khat in Somalia in the early 1990s, a popular social drug that causes mild euphoria, hyperactivity and insomnia (Odenwal et al. 2007). Oral history interviews add depth and dimension to these accusations, revealing a nuance that remains underappreciated in discourse intent on dismissing Somali youth violence as the actions of stoned teenagers.

FB: At the time, journalists talked a lot about the use of khat in Somalia, implying the drugs made young people more prone to violence...

AM: So khat you understand is used for recreation in Somalia, it is not like a —

FB: Not like a class A drug, like heroin?

AM: Yes exactly, it is not like this at all. So yes, it is something that happens all the time but you cannot say it is the reason for the violence, no. So maybe sometimes people enjoy [khat] not with their friends or colleagues but a young person could [consume it] to stay alert or something, that is what you mean, I

think? But you know, I think this about the children who come to [organization name redacted] from Al-Shaabab: it is easier to say they are radicalized or something than to say, they are just like me or my children but they made these choices to be alive, or to change where they live, or to earn some money, whatever. It is easier to think this way – like to say these people are on drugs.

Studies have observed the rise in the consumption of khat in Somalia's civil war, claiming it transitioned from a social ritual to everyday usage because the war 'radically challenged' the social-cultural norms that regulated its consumption (Odenwal et al. 2007). Micael Odenwald et al. specifically identify the high usage of khat amongst male ex-combatants in Somalia, compared to civilian war survivors and males without war experience (Odenwal et al. 2007). The insight this testimony provides into the widely available and accepted use of khat in armed groups, however, is the correlation between identified usage and presumption of diminished cognitive agency. By drawing a poignant parallel with demobilised Al-Shabaab, who are often dismissed as religious radicals, this participant emphasises that drug consumption, mild or otherwise, is one facet in a complex story of opportunity, fear, survival and empowerment.

This article has sought to begin to unravel the homogenous narrative of Somali youth violence in the civil war. This requires more life histories with a range of formerly armed youth to do so comprehensively and map the various experiences of youth actors both in Mogadishu and elsewhere to better understand key regional patterns and differences.

Contextualising child recruitment and use in Al-Shabaab

The Islamist militant group Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahadeen emerged from the ashes of civil war in Somalia, producing an alternate form of authority to successive transitional governments, rebranding into a clan-transcendent militant organisation during the US-backed Ethiopian invasion in 2006 (Harper 2012). By 2008, Al-Shabaab was listed as foreign terrorist organisation by the US government, sparking a great deal of concern about the groups' links with Al Qaeda, its status as 'sanctuary' for exiled Islamist terrorists and the number of non-Somali recruits training with Al-Shabaab before returning to their countries of origin (Marchal 2004; Pham 2013; Ingiriis 2019). The dominance of literature on Al-Shabaab as a threat to international security has in turn peripheralized research on local lives and pathways to and within the group, including those of extended communities in Al-Shabaab territories for whom the group provides economic, political and social infrastructure. Similarly, while humanitarian practitioners have highlighted that over half of Al-Shabaab's ranks are below the age of eighteen, very little work has been done to understand the movement from the perspective of youth. When children are foregrounded in the literature, it is to identify the lengths of their 'radicalisation', or the forced nature of their recruitment (Toole 2023; Donnelly 2023). Part of the reason for this narrow field of inquiry is the accessibility restrictions imposed by the designation of Al-Shabaab as a 'terrorist group', which prohibits researchers from working directly with members of the movement (and indeed practitioners from being able to

negotiate the release of child soldiers). A further limitation on the existing research remains the 'largely unchallenged assumption' that extremist groups present a fundamentally different set of challenges to other kinds of armed groups (O'Neil and Van Broeckhoven 2018). The remainder of this article examines youth pathways into Al-Shabaab in order to situate the group within Somalia's long history of political Islamism and youth militancy, arguing that the movement does not represent a new frontier in child soldiering but rather has strong connections with earlier patterns of mobilisation, constructions of Somali manhood and non-clanship opportunity. It is worth noting here that there are close parallels between early child soldier literature in the 1990-early 2000s and contemporary 'child jihadis' that presume children in conflict are inherently vulnerable, irrational and innocent. This perspective has been largely discredited by child soldier resilience work (see Cortes and Buchanan 2007; Klasen et al. 2010).

The accepted age of a child significantly differs across Somalia's Federal Member States. Despite the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2015 and constitutional enshrinement stipulating that a child is anyone below the age of eighteen, some Somali states with independent legal jurisdiction continue to follow the Shafi'i madhab age of adulthood as fifteen, including semi-autonomous Puntland and self-governing Somaliland, where the age of criminal majority is fifteen. Interview participants agreed that at a household level, fifteen remains the age for both males and females to be considered adults, although this can be as low as thirteen in Kismayo and other parts of the Lower Jubba province where younger people marry early and/or lead their own households. Al-Shabaab's extensive recruitment of under-eighteens must therefore be viewed through cultural and religious constructions of age in Somalia. The bulk of its active armed membership is presumed to be fifteen and over, while younger recruits either provide support services in camps or, for the thousands of girls recruited from the age of twelve, are recruited as wives (Stern 2019). Oral interviewees indicated that there is more overlap between the categories of 'wives' and 'soldiers' in Al-Shabaab than previously explored, pointing towards the testimonies of demobilised women who began as young wives and transitioned through their relationships to frontline roles. For the purposes of this article, however, this research focused on the recruitment of males below eighteen who comprise between 40 and 50 per cent of Al-Shabaab ranks.

Since its conception, Al-Shabaab has used a variety of recruitment methods to enlist young people, including abduction from schools, villages and homes. Other methods range from violent coercion of families to voluntary recruitment of youth in government areas through social media. One participant claimed that vulnerable youth are drawn to Al-Shabaab specifically because the government has pledged to no longer recruit under-eighteens into its armed forces.

MI: Children, when they are with the government, they are not recruited as soldiers. They are not because of the age limit. Yes, the government has committed not to recruit children under the age of eighteen into their armed forces. They don't include them. So, the children travel to get into it [Al-Shabaab], because it is a job for them.

Most of Al-Shabaab's recruitment, however, takes place within its controlled territory. *Dugsis* and *madrassas* (Islamic schools) are key sites for children to receive religious education and socialise directly with Al-Shabaab recruiters. While one participant from a major INGO claimed that 'for children living in Al-Shabaab territory, recruitment is all but inevitable', a practitioner from a local internally displaced people's (IDP) camp explained a more nuanced perspective:

MW: So, is everyone from these areas Al-Shabaab? Yes and no. Al-Shabaab is the main employer. They provide the education, the jobs, the everything. If you live there, ok maybe you sell the clothes or food or something [to Al-Shabaab members]... that is just your life. Those are the people who are in charge in your area, same as there is people in charge in your [the interviewer's] area... if you are from a minority clan - like Bantu - then maybe you join for some more money, a little status. For some people it is an opportunity.

This testimony hinted at the layers of lives in Al-Shabaab-controlled areas, where joining the group can provide a rare opportunity for financial and social mobility and access to the means to social reproduction. The Somali Bantu identified here are a minority group, not affiliated with any major clan and living in close proximity to Al-Shabaab territory. Other participants confirmed that marginalised ethnic groups are at particular risk of youth recruitment as Al-Shabaab claims to transcend clan identity and offer advancement opportunities for 'all Somalis', in a rhetoric similar to the early colonial Dervish movement.

Indeed, it is worth considering the similarities between Al-Shabaab membership and the other criminal enterprise that has dominated narratives of Somalia in international media: piracy. The phenomenon of Somali pirates (*burcard badeed*, sea bandits) emerged with the civil war as fishermen took up arms to deter illegal fishing vessels, evolving quickly into a lucrative economy for those who could find means to ransom international ships and goods. According to the UK Foreign Affairs Committee, by 2012 there were between 1500 and 3000 pirates on the coast of Somalia, ranging in age between fifteen and thirty. The pathways to piracy resonate closely with those to Al-Shabaab; in a landscape where violence and shortages have diminished opportunities to sustain a household, the lure of armed maritime groups promising money, status and *raganimo* is substantial (Gjelsvik and Bjørge 2012). One participant explained:

MI: Joining Al-Shabaab or being involved in piracy... there is little difference [note: participant is referencing voluntary recruits]. You make money, you can have opportunity. People do not like this, but it is the truth.

Writing on the gendered and social reproduction practices at the heart of Somali piracy, Brittany Gilmer identified the relationship between masculinity and piracy in Somalia, where 'the image of the pirate [has been reconstructed] to be in line with that of the ideal Somali man' (Gilmer 2017; Gilmer 2019). Interviewing former pirates detained in the Seychelles, Gilmer writes:

When asked why they personally 'went to sea', most cited poverty and the inability to fulfil family/marital responsibilities as a push factor. The family/marital responsibilities fell into one of two categories. One category involves married men who claimed they could not afford to support their families, hence they went to sea to make ends meet. The second category involves single men who claimed they could not afford the dowry required to enter into a marriage (Gilmer 2017).

These intersections between armed violence, household provision, marriage and opportunity echo those discussed by Al-Shabaab reintegration practitioners.

AM: There are those communities who went to Al-Shabaab because they felt injustice. They have been denied their rights. They have denied their rights in terms of land ownership, in terms of job opportunities, in terms of educational opportunities . . . [joining] is an economic investment. They can support their families, get married maybe if they are doing well.

Al-Shabaab's emphasis on its movement as a unique space for politically and socially marginalised groups to access 'money, wives and power' also resonates closely with the recruitment of *mooryaan* by private militias in the early years of civil war. Just as these emerging factions fostered an environment through which to claim one's masculinity outside the bounds of normative clan constructions of *raganimo*, Al-Shabaab also offers a viable pathway towards manhood to draw recruits. This participant continued:

AM: If you can provide for yourself and your family, maybe you are the first person in your family to be able to do that for some long time. So that is a big thing, to do that as a young person. You get \$50 when you join. That is very attractive for some young people, to get that for their families.

The construction of Somali masculinity is an underexplored theme in Al-Shabaab recruitment, particularly, as this interviewee suggests, since the legacy of civil war has left few other opportunities for conventional routes to manhood through supporting the household. The promise of wives, too, applies directly to Somali men's emphasis on reproduction and fatherhood as key indicators of *raganimo* (El-Bushra and Gardner 2016). Even for the younger children connected through *madrassas*, masculinity emerges as a central facet in their potential militarisation. One participant claimed: 'They are going to Quranic schools, where they approach children; they entice children. They organise a competition whereby the ones who are the fastest become soldiers' (MW Interview). This obvious celebration of normative masculinity, targeted at minority groups who face additional challenges in claiming *raganimo*, is a powerful recruitment mechanism for Al-Shabaab. Viewed against a longer history of mobilising young males for armed conflict, the precedent for militarising manhood in Somalia is argued here to represent the evolution of an established pattern of recruitment. Al-Shabaab, at its core, relies on the same structures, goals and rhetoric as other armed groups in Somalia (and elsewhere). Recognising that Al-Shabaab is not a homogenous, discrete militant entity but is made up of entangled lives navigating minority clan politics, youth mobility concerns, family responsibilities and a political economy shattered by decades of conflict is key to demystifying the extremist group in research that can attend to the critically underexplored social dimensions of its existence.

Conclusion

The development of young Somalis engaged in armed conflict from pre-colonial *diya* warriors through to Al-Shabaab reveals a long history of youth militancy, driven by the demands for violent labour and Somali constructions of age

maturity. Over time, the push and pull of a viable pathway to *raganimo* has remained consistent in the recruitment of young males to an array of non-state armed groups, while the influence of clan loyalty has diminished with the pathways opened up by alternative enterprises. Beginning to map the entangled layers of lives in armed conflict in Somalia, this article has sought to critically analyse the imagined, homogenous Somali 'boy soldier' and better capture the range of allegiances and experiences that exist across the spectrum of war survivors. By establishing patterns and precedent for mobilisation and adolescent militarism, the surge of child soldiers after the outbreak of civil war in 1991 appears not as a sudden descent into chaos, but situated within the historically contingent process of encouraging young males to be available for violence. Ultimately, examining the social, gendered and aged recruitment of children into Al-Shabaab undermines claims in terrorism studies that extremist groups represent a new frontier. By unpacking the social and age dimensions of the militant group, this work has sought to examine the consistent influence of money, survival and manhood that has driven the recruitment of children to armed groups throughout Somalia's history.

Further life histories are required in order to concretely retell the history of armed conflict in Somalia in a way that reflects the range and complexity of social experiences of war. Firstly, a longitudinal analysis of the pathways of children associated with armed groups during and after civil war is needed to fully grapple with the connections and divergences between different armed militias. Secondly, a study of girls operating within armed groups in Somalia will provide new perspectives on the emerging connections between being wives, occupying auxiliary support roles and frontline combatants. These developing research pathways are but a few of the avenues that will bridge history, conflict studies and security studies to diversify and deepen existing literature on armed conflict in Somalia.

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