WDN Interview with Prof. Lidwien (Ladan) Kapteijns: Author of Clan Cleansing in Somalia
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Editor's Note: WardheerNews has been afforded the rare opportunity to conduct the first interview with Professor Lidwien Kapteijns, author of the recently debuted book *Clan Cleansing in Somalia, The Ruinous Legacy of 1991*. Lidwien Kapteijns, is a professor of history at Wellesley College. Dr. Kapteijns is the author of many papers, research and books. Professor Kapteijns previous research includes the study of Somali popular song texts of the period 1955-1985 and her consequent book *Women's Voices in a Man's world* based on that research. Her new book uses poetry in the public sphere that specifically condemns the actions of that period to contextualize the events of 1991-92. Professor Kapteijns has done extensive research, which contributes to the Somali scholarship, filling the gap that exists in the scholarship on the history of the Somali civil war. This book, *Clan Cleansing in Somalia* is a page-turner with heavy details of the events that have paved the way for Somalia to be in constant chaos for the past twenty years. It will no doubt bring back memories that many have buried away to move forward with their lives. Witnessing a country that is still divided along clan lines, we hope this book is the
beginning of the dialogue needed to come to terms with the violence that has transpired in the homeland. This interview was conducted by Abdelkarim A. Hassan for wardheerNews.

WardheerNews: Prof. Ladan, how did you come to the project of writing your newly released book “Clan Cleansing in Somalia”?

Prof. Ladan: I actually began this research project as a study of how Somali popular culture represented and commented upon civil war violence. There are amazingly moving poems in Somali about this topic. In the book I cite Mustafa Sheekh Cilmi’s “Disaster” (Masiibo) and Abdulqaadir Cabdi Shube’s “Sound, Drum of Wisdom” (Durbaan garashoow diyaan). But other creative Somali voices speak about this violence in English-language novels and free verse.

It was these powerful literary contributions that inspired me to delve deeper into the topic and to pursue the kinds of sources conventionally used by academic historians: contemporary news sources, including transcripts of broadcasts by Radio Mogadishu and BBC London; spy sheets such as Africa Confidential and the Indian Ocean Newsletter; memoirs by foreign diplomats on the scene in Mogadishu until early January 1991; reports of fieldtrips to Somalia by Somali and Somalist scholars and analysts; some videotapes shot in Mogadishu at the time, as well as secondary sources in many languages and of many kinds.

WDN: What is the central theme of the book?

Prof. Ladan: The central theme of the book is, as the title indicates, the campaign of clan cleansing that was unleashed in Mogadishu in the wake of the expulsion of Maxamed Siyaad Barre on January 26, 1991. The leaders of the armed opposition front that took control of Mogadishu and the new provisional government at this moment (the USC), together with some of their allies (especially the SNM and SDM), physically attacked, massacred, and expelled civilian individuals who had largely not supported or benefited from Barre’s rule (as these leaders themselves often had) but who could be classified as part of a particular politicized genealogical or biological construct that also encompassed Barre.
This campaign of terror warfare (driving civilians of particular clan backgrounds out by robbing, maiming, raping, and massacring them) differed from what had happened before in the nature of the violence it perpetrated, its temporal and geographical scope, and its context at the moment of regime collapse. It consisted of the organized and purposeful incitement of ordinary people to clan-based communal violence outside of the institutions of the state. It affected first tens and then hundreds of thousands of people. It lasted for more than two years and affected all of south-central and southern Somalia.

I argue that, instead of the generic chaos, revenge, and general clan in-fighting mentioned in older, simplistic or biased accounts, it was this targeted campaign of mass killings and expulsions of tens of thousands of individuals of particular clan backgrounds that prevented the establishment of a government of national unity, set into motion an endless back-and-forth of militia warfare in which clan-based collective violence against civilians became normalized practice, and thus caused state collapse. My book tries to come to terms with how this became possible by analyzing the historical and contemporary contexts of 1991.

WDN: Why do you refer to the events of 1991-1992 as a policy and campaign of clan cleansing?

Prof. Ladan: My use of the term clan cleansing is adapted from that of “ethnic cleansing” that was used in the final report of the United Nations Commission of Experts about the civil war in former Yugoslavia. This definition describes the attempt at making an area homogeneous by using force and intimidation – especially through the destruction and robbing of property, large-scale sexual assault, maiming, and massacring – to expel civilians of particular group (ethnic, religious, or, in the Somali case, clan) backgrounds. My research leaves no doubt about the fact that the events of 1991-1992 indeed represented clan cleansing, the organized and purposeful incitement of ordinary civilians to perpetrate clan-based cirib-tir against other ordinary Somali civilians.

I make it clear in the book that not just the victims of the clan cleansing campaign but all civilian victims of the Somali civil war, from 1978 to the present and on all sides of the many conflicts making up that war, deserve to be acknowledged and remembered. I focus on 1991 because, as I argue in the book, the nature and scale of the violence that the campaign of clan cleansing unleashed and the sudden reversal of the axis of opposition it brought about represented a key shift in the history of the Somali civil war. This campaign of clan cleansing not only differed from what went before and came after, I argue in the book, but also constitutes an unacknowledged and unbewältigt (undigested) past that remains an obstacle to social reconstruction and moral repair.
WDN: Are there findings that particularly surprised you during your research?

Prof. Ladan: Two things come to mind.

First, in his *The Zanzibar Chest* (2003), Hartley describes an episode of clan cleansing he personally witnessed at a road block in Mogadishu immediately after Barre’s expulsion at the end of January 1991. He writes: “A queue of civilians was huddled at a roadblock before a gang of rebels. As each person was waved through, another came forward and began uttering a litany of names.” Hartley’s newly acquired guide, a wild fellow wearing a bright-red wig, explained to him that people were reciting the names of their clan ancestors. Hartley remembers thinking that such an oral version of fingerprints or condensed history of war and peace was quite poetic, but this thought was interrupted when “bang: a gunman shot one of the civilians, who fell with blood gushing from his head and was pushed aside onto the heap of corpses.” He was shocked, but his guide’s laconic epitaph for the shot civilian was simply: “Wrong clan .... He should have borrowed the ancestors of a friend” (2003: 169). What surprised me was that even Hartley, an accomplished journalist and writer, did not ask who was who in the tableau in front of him either in 1991, when he witnessed it, nor in 2003, when he published his memoirs!

Second, I was initially completely astounded by the sloppy oversights, glib denials, and willful misrepresentations and understatements that mar so many scholarly analyses and political memoirs dealing with 1991-1992. However, when I immersed myself further in the scholarship about large-scale crimes against humanity such as genocide and ethnic/clan cleansing, I found that silences, misrepresentations, and denials both during and after the perpetration of such violence are so much part and parcel of such violence that they become part of its diagnosis. Experts in genocide studies such as Stanley Cohen (*States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering*, 2001) have developed a typology of denials including *blatant denial* (“nothing happened; it was just chaos”), *interpretive denial* (“something happened but it was not the clan cleansing of civilians of a particular set of clan backgrounds”), or even *denial of the victims* (“they deserved what they got”). All these are present in the Somali historiography of the clan cleansing of 1991-1992 and I give examples in my book.

WDN: Women are not a major focus of the book. How do you see their involvement in the civil war violence analyzed in your book and what may be their roles in coming to terms with what happened.

Prof. Ladan: Women have proven that they were and are not immune to group hate-narratives or incitement to violence. This is not surprising, for women are, with all their strengths, not superhuman. However, it is important that we acknowledge this and do not underestimate the hatred and violence of which women too are capable in particular historical circumstances. However, the movers and shakers in the civil war were (and are) men, not women, and it is women who have taken (and are taking) a lion’s share in re-establishing the basic conditions for life in Somalia and the diaspora.
While I believe that all Somalis of good will can engage in the critical memory work I believe is needed in the Somali context, I nevertheless see a potentially crucial role for women here. First, women have always been the political and emotional nodal points in a web of kinship that is in principle much wider than that defined by the patrilineal fundamentalism violently imposed by clan bosses and warlords. Second, women can reach back towards a women’s sphere in which attention to the smaller scale of everyday life as well as social relations of care with concrete individuals have been a source of pride and not necessarily a steppingstone to formal public and political power for the individual. Third, women have some experience with rejecting their biology as their destiny while still fully acknowledging that sexism is a real powerful and destructive force that must be actively engaged and resisted. The same awareness is needed to understand and deal with the categories of clan, caste, and race. Because individuals cannot be reduced to them, we must, on the one hand, refuse to take these categories for granted, while, on the other hand, acknowledging their power and the harm they can nevertheless do to individuals who are willy-nilly associated with them.

I also believe in the potentially special role of youth in the constructive and critical memory work that is needed, as has been argued for postconflict Rwanda and former Yugoslavia, but we will have to leave that subject for another occasion.

**WDN: Do you see a special role for literary work in such critical memory work?**

**Prof. Ladan:** Yes, very much so. This work has been ongoing. Representatives include famous authors such as Nuruddin Farah and Abdourahman Waberi as well as less well-known ones such as Abdirazak Y. Osman (*In the Name of the Fathers*, 1996), Faisal Ahmed Hassan (*Maamdeeq*, in Somali, 2000), and Yasmeen Maxamuud (*Nomadic Diaries*, 2011). Most recently Cristina Ali Farah’s *Little Mother* has been published in an excellent English translation from the Italian by Indiana University Press. I would like to mention especially Mohamud Togane, based in Montreal, who for many years has consistently “outed” and ridiculed the clan hate-narratives all sides of the conflict have produced and still perpetuate. That unpleasant labor of challenging the widely held but deeply prejudicial and essentializing hate-narratives is part of the “facing processes” that make up critical memory work.

**WDN: Finally, where the book can be purchased?**

**Prof. Ladan:** The book could be purchased in most of the online book stores, [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com) and at the university of Pennsylvania, in the U.S., email [hfscustserv@press.jhu.edu](mailto:hfscustserv@press.jhu.edu) or call toll-free to place or inquire about orders: 800-537-5487. Code P5A2 for20% reduction

**WDN: Thank you Ladan for your time**

**Prof. Ladan:** You are welcome Abdelkarim

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