PART I  Refugees
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In a world of globalization disengagement from Africa’s violence is no longer an option.
—Paul Richards, Fighting for the Rain Forest

In 1988, Cali Osman lived behind our dwelling in Banta in a row of neat mud houses with his three wives, ten children, divorced sister, several nephews, and elderly widowed aunt. Caliyow Isaaq and his large family—three wives, twelve children—lived across the path from our compound; his wife Amina (pictured in the introduction, fig. 1.13) was a frequent guest in our house. Sheikh Axmed Nur (pictured in the introduction, fig. 1.9) lived across the village from us with his two wives and six children. Although each family lived at the barest subsistence level, surviving on what they grew on their farms and sold for a few hundred dollars each year, each was considered wealthy in family and by reputation. Cali Osman was a nationally recognized poet in a country where poetry is revered, viewed by his community as an intelligent and wise elder often sought for his mediation and oratory skills.1 We spent many happy evenings tucked into a circle with other villagers listening to his poetry as a bonfire roared. Caliyow Isaaq was a master carpenter and head chef for the village feasts, often called on for his surgical abilities as well. Sheikh Axmed Nur, a powerful healer and religious leader, was known far and wide
for his curing skills and the ability to communicate with the spiritual domain. As my mentors in village life in 1987–88, these men and their families spent countless hours with me, so the survivors from these families were among the first people from Banta with whom I sought to reconnect. Recounting the experiences of these three families reveals how war arrived in Banta, how the farmers became refugees, and how Somalia’s civil war is a global story.

From their photographs, one could imagine Cali Osman, Caliyow Isaaq, and Sheikh Axmed Nur as peasant-everymen living at the very edges of the world: remote, isolated Banta was hundreds of miles from any paved roads, inaccessible for half the year during the rainy season, and lacking in electricity, running water, and any electronic form of communication with the outside world except Caliyow Isaaq’s battery-powered radio. The women in their families typically owned one dress each; their children worked in the fields since there was no local school. It might seem logical to conclude that families like these in a village like Banta lived more or less off the global grid—unaffected by global events, by larger political and economic currents sweeping the globe.
In fact, quite the opposite is true. As many anthropological accounts demonstrate, people in villages like Banta are profoundly affected by global processes and decisions made by elite world leaders. The roots of the conflict that tore apart Banta stretch back to the Indian Ocean slave trade (which was stimulated, in part, by the transatlantic slave trade), weave through the colonial era with the imposition of European domination that reshaped African borders and identities, were nurtured through the political alignments demanded by global superpowers during the Cold War, shifted again with the imposition of “development” initiatives by the world’s wealthier countries to remake the world’s poorer countries through capitalist interventions, and exploded with the fall of the Berlin Wall. The stories of what happened during the war to the families of Cali Osman, Caliyow Isaaq, and Sheikh Axmed Nur are simultaneously global and local; their fates were shaped at the intersection of global and local politics.

**Race and Ancestry**

In contexts of civil war, violence often absorbs and makes harmfully meaningful historically shaped ethnic, racial, kin-based, or religious differences. The same is true in Somalia, where race and ancestry became vital identity markers when Somalia’s civil war spread to the Jubba Valley. Our story begins a century ago, when the parents of Cali Osman and Sheikh Axmed Nur were born in the upper Shabelle Valley, located in the border region where Ethiopia

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**Figure 1.2** Rainy season travel in the Jubba Valley, 1988. Photograph by Jorge Acero.
and Somalia now meet, a geographical area contested by the Somalis who lived there, Ethiopians, Italian and British colonial militaries, and anticolonial Somali dervish militias. The families of Cali Osman and Sheikh Axmed Nur were members of one of Somalia’s ethnic minority groups who came under the authority of one of Somalia’s prominent clans. Their ancestors probably preceded the arrival of Somali speakers in the region centuries ago; linguists and historians suggest that after Somali speakers moved into the Horn, autochthonous groups like those along the upper Shabelle converted to Islam and adopted one of the Somali languages, accepting a client status in relation to the more recently arrived Somali pastoralist clans.

The constant violence and conflict created by the international political actors trying to carve out colonies both under and independent of European control at the turn of the twentieth century produced a flow of refugees out of the upper Shabelle region, which included the parents of both Cali Osman and Sheikh Axmed Nur. As members of a Somali-speaking ethnic minority group, both families migrated into the Jubba River valley, where other ethnic minorities already lived, to settle in a farming village on the banks of the river.

Detailed oral histories and early colonial documents describe how the Jubba Valley had been settled by people whose parents and grandparents had been slaves in Somalia. A robust Indian Ocean slave trade operated in the nineteenth century, bringing tens of thousands of slaves from the east coast of Africa up to Somalia, where they were put to work on Somali-owned plantations stretching south along the coast from Mogadishu. The plantations produced food for the Somali plantation owners but also for trade to the Arabian Peninsula and beyond. Slaves who eventually escaped or were manumitted, like Caliyow Isaaq’s grandparents, fled into southern Somalia’s Jubba River valley to form independent farming villages, where they were later joined by refugees from the violence along the upper Shabelle, including the families of Cali Osman and Sheikh Axmed Nur.

By the mid-twentieth century, slavery had officially ended under British and Italian colonization, and population movements had settled into a pattern: free farmers of slave or non-Somali ancestry lived in small sedentary villages along the river, and Somali pastoralists maintained a nomadic lifestyle on the plains stretching to either side of the river valley. Everyone in southern Somalia knew the status differences that separated those living in Jubba Valley farming villages from everyone else because of their stigmatized slave (or non-Somali) ancestry, linguistically recorded in the derogatory terms used to identify them, such as ooji and adoon. Riverine farmers were considered more “African,” in contrast to the purported Arabic ancestry of ethnic Somalis, a difference recognized in the widespread use of mutually exclusive
physical terms to define the two groups: *jareer*, which means “hard hair,” described those of slave or non-Somali ancestry, and *jileec*, which means “soft,” described those identified as ethnic Somalis. Although many Jubba Valley farmers shared languages, religion, and many cultural practices with other Somalis, a ban on intermarriage between the two groups maintained the former’s inferior status, as did Italian colonial labor policies that targeted farmers, but not pastoralists, for forced labor requirements.

During my stay in Banta, I carefully documented the ways in which local residents mediated and managed the tensions provoked by Somali understandings of hierarchy and inequality that prized those of jileec status and subjugated those identified as jareer. Despite their non-Somali ancestry, everyone in Banta claimed membership in a Somali clan, either on the basis of the clan identity of the person who had originally enslaved their ancestors, or through an ancestor’s later adoption into a clan for protection and identity within Somali society. Scholars describe Somali kinship as a segmentary lineage structure, in which every Somali is a member of one of five major clan families (Darood, Dir, Isaaq, Rahanweyn, and Hawiye), each of which encompasses large groups of lineages in a cascading set of lineage-based kinship groups determined patrilineally. Every Somali claims membership in a particular lineage of a particular clan, and can identify his or her relationship to every other Somali through tracing his or her connections through the
overarching kinship system. The lineage and clan structure provided the basis for social and political life, including knowing one's enemies and allies when conflict occurred.\(^8\)

Banta included families who claimed membership in three of Somalia’s five major clans (Darood, Rahanweyn, and Hawiye), although the connections between families of different clan membership far outweighed the distinctions among them.\(^9\) In Banta, people married and shared friendships across clan lines, and when compensation had to be paid for a crime committed by a villager against someone from outside the village, all of Banta’s families contributed rather than just the offender’s clan relatives. In short, lineage and clan membership was far more important for claiming membership within broader Somali society than it was for structuring life within the village.

The jareer villagers in Banta used their membership in Somali clans to negotiate their relationships with the jileec Somali pastoralists who lived on the plains stretching away from the riverbanks: the Darood to the west and the Rahanweyn and Hawiye to the east. Because of their social status above those farmers identified as jareer, Somali (jileec) pastoralists who entered Jubba Valley villages seeking water or food felt entitled to assault, harass, and intimidate local farmers with relative impunity. My field notes are filled with stories about pastoralists grazing their animals on farmers’ ripening crops and assaulting those who attempted to defend their fields against invading hungry cows. My Banta neighbors usually explained this abuse as the behavior of particularly aggressive Somali individuals rather than as an expression of collective discrimination by pastoralist (jileec) Somalis against minority (jareer) farmers, and they attempted time and again to use the language of clan to seek compensation and mediation for their injuries.

While the majority of Banta villagers claimed to be affiliated with jileec Somali clans who lived to the east of the Jubba River valley, several Banta families maintained close ties with jileec Somali pastoralist families of the Darood clan, whose territory stretched to the west of the Jubba Valley. Xassan, the head of the village in whose compound I lived, had a close relationship with a Darood pastoralist family because his wife, Hamara, claimed Darood clan membership. Hamara’s father, Bilaal, was a locally powerful elder from Kakole, a village near Banta also on the west bank of the Jubba River, which was almost entirely populated by his extended family, all of whom claimed Darood clan membership.\(^10\) During my year in Banta I spent dozens of hours interviewing Bilaal about local history, including the history of slavery that his family shared with most villagers in the Jubba Valley. His grandfather, captured in Tanzania for enslavement in Somalia, had assumed Darood clan
identity after gaining his freedom, and his offspring continued to claim that identity, seeking solidarity with the Darood pastoralists who lived in the bush to the west of Banta and Kakole.

In addition to the kinship and trading ties that many village families maintained with pastoralists living in the bush outside Banta, several former pastoralist Darood families had settled in Banta after losing their livestock to drought and disease, maintaining a neighborly but guarded relationship with other villagers. Maxamed Gedi, his brother Said, Xussein, and other Darood arrivals joined the village after receiving land grants from village elders. Although the male Darood village residents were recognized as rather severe and hostile personalities, they never caused any outright trouble within the village during my stay.

Despite the villagers’ efforts to claim a foothold in Somalia’s system of clans, I soon learned that the Darood pastoralist families with whom they traded in the bush outside Banta did not share their perception of membership in Somali society. After witnessing numerous instances of abuse by pastoralists against villagers, followed by mediation by clan and village elders to determine compensation, I began interviewing Darood pastoralist leaders from the bush surrounding Banta about their perception of shared clan allegiances with the villagers. In our interviews, they scoffed at the efforts of middle valley farmers to seek membership in Somali kin groups. One local Darood leader explained that the Jubba Valley farmers could never be treated as equal lineage members and avoided reenslavement by his clan only because of national laws against slavery. Siad Barre had in fact outlawed the entire clan system in Somalia, making clan- and slave-based hierarchies and distinctions illegal. Although it is hard to describe the dictator as a protector of human rights, the Somali Darood clan leaders living outside of Banta insisted that Barre’s antislavery laws were the only thing keeping them from reenslaving Jubba Valley farmers.

So in 1987–88, a détente based on a mutually recognized inequality between jareer and jileec residents characterized life in the middle valley. While status differences gave jileec pastoralists the upper hand in compensation negotiations when they harmed villagers, shared clan membership between some pastoralist and farmer families provided a language to seek mediation and compensation, even if it was usually paltry and begrudging. Within the village, jileec former pastoralists of the Darood clan held no special power because they were so clearly in the minority and received land for farming only through the good graces of the jareer village elders. Banta farmers held allegiances to both their village and their clans; having never been forced to choose sides, they could maintain an imagined balance of clan and village associations that
allowed them to navigate the status differences between jileec and jareer as best they could. No one in Banta realized how murderously meaningful the status hierarchy separating jareer from jileec would become.

**The Cold War Comes to the Jubba Valley**

When independence from colonial control arrived in 1960, the parents of Cali Osman, Caliyow Isaaq, and Sheikh Axmed Nur had survived the forced labor campaigns of the Italian colonizers in the Jubba Valley as well as the British-Italian skirmishes that passed control over the Jubba Valley back and forth between the British and the Italians until independence in 1960. The colonial-era conflict in the upper Shabelle region had come to an unquiet conclusion in the mid-twentieth century when international powers ultimately settled on a border between Somalia and Ethiopia that granted to Ethiopia a large chunk of Somali-inhabited territory. Somalis were understandably outraged, and a discourse of irredentism—a desire to reunite within one nation-state all the territory occupied by Somali speakers—pervaded nationalist Somali rhetoric after independence in 1960.

Siad Barre came to power as Somalia's president in a coup in 1969, advocating a political platform he called scientific socialism. He initially allied himself with the Soviet Union, from whom he received weaponry, military assistance, and economic support. Seeking to fulfill his irredentist goals, Barre launched an attack against Ethiopia in 1977 to reclaim the Somali-inhabited territory ceded to Ethiopia decades earlier. But when the Soviet Union chose to back Ethiopia, their other client in the Horn of Africa, Siad Barre expelled the Soviets from Somalia and turned to the United States for patronage, offering access to Somalia for military bases in return for massive foreign aid. In the context of Cold War geopolitics, the United States saw Somalia as a strategic prize because of its location on the Indian Ocean and its proximity to the Persian Gulf. During the 1980s, the United States made Somalia its second largest recipient of foreign aid in Africa, granting Barre hundreds upon hundreds of millions of dollars in military and economic aid. Analysts estimate that Barre received over a billion dollars in foreign aid from international sources during the 1980s, an astounding figure for a lightly populated, arid country with few natural resources.11

Barre put the money to good use, employing the familiar pattern of patronimonal politics to consolidate power in the hands of his closest relatives and trusted advisors, particularly those of the Darood clan living in the south. Barre skillfully manipulated the clan system to privilege some clans at the expense of others, leading commentators like British anthropologist I. M. Lewis...
to conclude that Somalia's civil war represented a victory of clan politics over state building. Other observers, including me, emphasized how the wealth flowing into Somalia from foreign aid enabled the growth of an elite, urban-based class of politicians and businessmen with close government connections. Class-based inequality had arrived in Somalia, joining hierarchies of race and ancestry created previously through the slave trade and migration.  

However one understands the manipulations of Barre's rule, several things are clear: his alliances with the United States (and formerly the Soviet Union) weaponized the country and maintained his regime; he used massive state resources gained from foreign aid to bolster his bases of support, primarily in the south, against northern clans and communities that protested against their exclusion from his largesse; and his practice of patrimonial politics enabled urban-based political and business elites from Mogadishu to use the instruments of the state to enrich themselves at the expense of their fellow citizens. What did foreign aid and the patrimonialism it funded mean for Cali Osman, Caliyow Isaaq, and Sheikh Axmed Nur, living in Banta in the distant Jubba Valley? Despite the massive amount of aid flowing into the country under Barre's dictatorship, villages like Banta received no benefits from it. There were no schools, medical facilities, infrastructure, roads, policing, or state support structures. The only way that Banta experienced the foreign aid flowing into the country was that foreign and multilateral development agencies involved in shaping Somalia's postsocialist economy identified the Jubba Valley as ripe for capitalist transformation. The World Bank planned to build the second largest dam in all of Africa on the upper Jubba Valley; the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and European development agencies planned to build paved roads and commercial irrigation projects throughout the valley, and USAID planned and funded a land reform program to privatize all land ownership. In 1988, when I scrutinized the official land registry for Banta in the Ministry of Agriculture, I discovered that all the land in Banta had been legally claimed by businessmen and politicians from Mogadishu who had never lived there, but who were waiting to exercise their new ownership rights until the foreign development agencies completed their projects. One evening after this discovery, as I sat with Banta villagers around a bonfire discussing their future, Cali Osman predicted they would all end up as landless, impoverished wage laborers on commercial plantations owned by wealthy urban businessmen. We never imagined a worse fate was in store for them. The takeover by city overlords might have dismantled the delicate, if unequal, balance between jareer and jileec residents in the Jubba Valley in a way that was harmful to both groups if the war hadn't changed everything.
Civil War

Just after our departure from Somalia the Berlin Wall fell, and the reverberations of this globally momentous event reached all the way to Banta. The dictator Siad Barre—allied of the United States, kept in power largely by U.S. aid—suddenly became a pariah in the new global order, in which alliances and enemies were no longer defined by the “free” world versus the communist world. In the new world order that emerged after the fall of the Berlin Wall, people like Siad Barre were expendable to the United States, and Barre was very quickly redefined in speeches in the U.S. Congress as a human rights abuser. Although Barre’s government had regularly imprisoned and tortured its dissenters, the regime’s heinous actions became important to U.S. politicians only after communism collapsed and it was difficult to justify U.S. support for such a dictator any longer. As insurgencies against Barre’s totalitarian rule mounted within Somalia, Barre struggled to maintain control by bombing and strafing villages in the north in retaliation for insurrection by northern-based political opponents. The United States dramatically cut aid to Somalia in 1990, and within a year Barre’s government collapsed under pressure from armed antigovernment groups that had joined forces to oust him.

Although life under Siad Barre had not been easy for Jubba Valley farmers, what happened after his government collapsed was horrific. Fleeing Mogadishu for Kenya in 1991, Barre and his militia came through the Jubba Valley, pursued by opposing militias chasing him out of the country. As his supporters made their way up the valley, they distributed weapons and military vehicles to his Darood clan allies, the Somali pastoralists who inhabited the plains to the west of the valley, admonishing them to maintain control of the valley and not cede it to the incoming Hawiye militias who were pursuing him from the east. These livestock herders–turned–militiamen began a cross-river campaign to push back the incoming militias arriving from the east. The unarmed farming villages got caught in the crossfire, to their profound devastation.

In the confusing weeks following Siad Barre’s flight up the valley, Bu’aale was one of the first towns in the middle valley to experience deadly violence when a Darood militiaman opened fire in the marketplace, killing three farmers he suspected of trying to buy weapons. Darood pastoralists–turned–militia began turning their guns against local farmers in order to assert control over the valley, killing those who resisted. About a dozen men of Duqiyo, a small village between Banta and Bu’aale, disobeyed an order issued by a militiaman not to leave the village; for punishment they were marched to a large mango tree, tied to its base, and shot to death. They had been trying to sneak into Bu’aale
for provisions. Their bodies were left to rot, spied upon by small children from Bu’aale who came to investigate. Refugees from Duqiyo and Bu’aale began arriving in Banta, looking for security with their relatives.

But within Banta, families from the Darood clan that had settled in the village as farmers, including Maxamed Gedi, his brother Said, Xussein, and a few others, had obtained guns from their relatives in the bush and used them to take over Banta. They compiled a list of the names of everyone in the village and began to police everyone’s movements in and out of the village, trying to assert demographic control and to hinder possible interactions with Hawiye militias. Calling themselves a “committee,” Maxamed Gedi and his group kept accounts of the villagers’ crop production, requiring each family to report to the committee on their farm’s production and claiming a portion of everyone’s harvest as a residential tax, which they redistributed to their pastoralist Darood clan relatives in the bush. Some of their relatives from the bush even moved into the village to join them, living off the work of the unarmed farmers.

Kidnapping and ransom, the fund-raising method used by criminals throughout the world, became their primary strategy for obtaining food. Initially they targeted the new arrivals seeking refuge in Banta after fleeing violence in other communities. Maxamed Gedi and his contingent would imprison newcomers until their village relatives paid their “entry tax.” Sadiq, who fled to Banta from Bu’aale after witnessing the massacred Duqiyo men, remembers such abductions as a rite of passage, even joking that they were like immigration control. But Maxamed Gedi and the others soon turned on their long-time neighbors, beating them up, imprisoning them, and then demanding a ransom from their families as a tool of control and humiliation, particularly against the village elders.

Sitting on the floor mats in her tiny Lewiston apartment while her grandchildren listened with rapt attention, Cali Osman’s wife Isha recounted the Darood men’s stranglehold on the village, describing how Maxamed Gedi captured her son, Ciise, tied him to a tree, and beat him until she and Cali Osman ransomed him with their harvest, thus imperiling their other children’s food security for the season. Her enduring fury and rage were apparent as she described the escalating assaults by the Darood men against their Banta neighbors.

“Were you surprised your neighbors could turn on you like that?” I asked.

“I was surprised!” she responded, emphatically. Echoing the ethic that dominated village life during my stay in Banta, Sadiq added, “Before the war we all lived together. We helped each other. If there was a funeral or a wedding, we all worked together and helped each other. So it was really surprising that this could happen.”
FIGURE 1.4 Ciise Cali Osman, Banta, 1988. Photograph by Jorge Acero.

FIGURE 1.5 Isha Iman, wife of Cali Osman and mother of Ciise, in center looking over her shoulder at the camera, Banta, 1988. Photograph by Jorge Acero.
With trepidation, I asked about our old friend and mentor Bilaal, the Darood-affiliated elder of Kakole and great historian, father to Hamara, in whose compound we lived during our stay. Isha became animated with disgust. “They were the worst! He was with them! He took over! He was one of the Darood who carried weapons and attacked and violated everyone. His family was the cause of the biggest problems. His son killed at least a hundred people. His Banta wife fled to Kakole, and they all participated in the attacking and looting of the other surrounding villages. It was like they wanted to take over and control everything and everybody.” She described how Bilaal and his sons used their weapons to control the neighboring villages, assisting the pastoralist Darood occupiers in their rapacious demands for food. Isha concluded her appalling tale about Bilaal’s collusion with the occupiers, shaking her head: “He had totally changed.”

Weapons enabled militiamen to make claims on women. Armed Darood militiamen demanded marriages with village women of their choice, including women who were already married. The dissolution of social bonds forged through marriage rituals, which are always accompanied by exchanges of gifts and food between the couple’s families, struck a blow at the very basis of village life. Bilaal’s militia forced his Banta granddaughters (the daughters of my former landlords) to divorce their husbands and move in with Darood militiamen. One refused and fled the village for refuge in Kenya with her husband. “Those with guns could do whatever they wanted—they demanded whatever they wanted,” Isha remembered. Maxamed Gedi and Saïd appropriated their neighbors’ belongings at gunpoint, including Caliyow Isaaq’s radio and the jacket Jorge had given him as a parting gift. Moving on from simply demanding food, they began taking clothes, raping women, and terrorizing the village.

The burden of handing over their harvest as a “tax” or as ransom meant constant and increasing hunger. “Every farmer supported three extra people!” Sadiq explained as he emphasized the toll on Banta farmers of supporting the armed pastoralist invaders and their relatives. Those with weapons not only demanded the lion’s share of the harvest but also required the farmers to transport their harvest into the bush to the families of the occupying militia. Caliyow Isaaq’s brother was ordered to carry the goods for two families, but as it was too much for him, he took one load, intending to return for the second. In fury, the man whose goods would be the second load shot him in the legs for his failure to cart the entire burden at once. Axmed Baraki recounted how the armed occupiers used villagers as target practice, mimicking one occupier who, he claimed, had said, as he took aim at a farmer-turned-porter, “Let’s see if I can shoot him from this far away.”
After initially focusing on new arrivals in Banta, Maxamed Gedi and his gang turned their attention to the village elders in order to disempower them, particularly Sheikh Axmed Nur in retaliation for his refusal to hand over his precious bow and arrow to the militia committee. One of his sons, Cabdullahi, recounted his family’s story as we sat surrounded by photographs from Banta in Sadiq’s Lewiston apartment. Cabdullahi was visiting Lewiston for a wedding from his new home in Syracuse, but before heading to the wedding feast we sat for several hours remembering prewar life in the village and talking about what had happened to his family during the war. As his stories about the war unfolded, his cell phone rang constantly with calls from his relatives from Lewiston, Hartford, Springfield, and even Kenya, who wanted to add their memories to our conversation. Studying the photographs and the 1988 census I had created of Banta residents, his eyes brimmed with tears. “All those people,” he said, shaking his head. “So many dead.”

His was the first family in Banta to experience murder. After Sheikh Axmed Nur’s son Kahiye failed to return from his farm one day, a group of elders, including Sheikh Axmed Nur, Cali Osman, and Caliyow Isaaq, went searching for him, accompanied by militia members Maxamed Gedi and Said. After three days of searching, his body was finally located hidden in the bush, with three bullet holes in his neck and upper back. Caliyow Isaaq extracted a bullet, matched to an AK-47, the make of gun used by Maxamed Gedi and his cohort. Cali Osman’s eldest daughter, Rabaca, overcame her fear and reported that she had seen Kahiye pass by her on the day he disappeared as she was collecting firewood, followed by Maxamed Gedi and Said. Shortly thereafter three shots rang out. Upon hearing this news, Caliyow Isaaq flew at Maxamed Gedi in such a rage that his children, in fear for his life, had to forcibly restrain him. Maxamed Gedi denied the ensuing accusation of murder, retaliating against the elders by arresting them and their sons for ransom. Over the next few months, Maxamed Gedi and his gang repeatedly abducted, tied up, and beat the elders and their adult sons, demanding payments of money, sesame oil, and corn for their release. Sheikh Axmed Nur’s second son, Ahmadey, was told he was the next target for assassination, but with only two bullets this time. He immediately fled the area. The turn toward assassination signaled a transformation in life; the transition from demanding food to killing neighbors marked a point of no return.

A brief respite arrived when the Hawiye militia from the east side of the Jubba River valley managed to push the war front across the valley and take control of the west bank of the Jubba, occupying Banta. The Darood occupiers retreated to the west, and Cali Osman composed a poem savagely mocking
their behavior and praising the incoming Hawiye occupiers. But their relief was short lived as the Darood militias managed to push back the Hawiye offensive, returning to retake Banta with enormous fury over the humiliating and widely repeated poem. In Somalia, poetry has long held tremendous political power, used as a weapon of war, broadcast over the radio and shared through recitations in camel camps and farming villages at night. Although the returning militia raided the village to kill Cali Osman, they only succeeded in killing two other village farmers while Cali Osman and his family escaped, spending the next several months living on the run in the bush. Cali Osman’s sons remember how they stole into villages at night to get food to augment their dependence on wild foods they could scavenge and how the family members arranged themselves across the treetops at night to sleep in order to escape militia patrols. In one funny story, Cali Osman’s son Cabdulkadir recounted a night he passed hiding in a warthog hole, desperately trying not to disturb the resident warthog. Cabdulkadir recalled how fear and constant movement exhausted the family, forcing Cali Osman to negotiate with the Darood occupiers to rewrite his poem in their honor, which they accepted in return for allowing him to return to Banta. Cabdulkadir and Idris believe he agreed to this compromise in order to plan his escape to Kenya along the route that began in Banta.

The family returned to an utterly polarized village. The Darood militia had successfully enlisted several non-Darood village men as their foot soldiers, including our old friend Adan, a village elder who claimed an affiliation to a clan not shared with any other villagers. Initially Adan had attempted to play the role of negotiator between the occupying Darood militia and the other villagers. In my conversations with Banta’s survivors in the United States, we puzzled for hours over the behavior of prominent former Banta elders like Adan, my landlord Xassan, and other village men who assisted the occupying militia, finally concluding that they must have felt they had little choice; they were also threatened by those with guns. While they did not participate in any killings or beatings, their negotiations between the occupiers and their Banta neighbors rarely helped the latter. Over time, Adan’s mediation efforts shifted toward collusion with the militia as he began reporting on the villagers’ movements and harvests, assisting the Darood occupiers in determining whom to kidnap and for how much. Eventually his compound, right next to the compound of Sheikh Axmed Nur, became a storehouse of weapons for the Darood and part of their Banta militia base for attacking other villages. He even threw out his daughter’s husband and allowed a Darood militiaman to marry her and take control of her former husband’s home, clothing, and farms. “Can
you imagine?” Sadiq asked incredulously. “The new husband walked around wearing the first husband’s clothes!”

**Becoming Refugees**

Shortly after their return from life on the run, Cali Osman’s family joined together with Caliyow Isaaq’s family in a group of about two hundred people to flee the village in a daring midnight escape. Amazingly, they managed to keep their plans a total secret from everyone else, to ensure the militia members could not block their departure or kill them for their disobedience. Sadiq recalls, “We woke up one morning and all those people were gone!” The militiamen were furious—they had just lost an army of food producers.

The trek to Kenya through hundreds of miles of desert was challenging, and one of Cali Osman’s wives died of starvation along the way. The journey, while grueling, benefited from the help of Somali pastoralists near the Kenyan border who, along with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), offered assistance and support to the fleeing refugees. Identifying the refugees as starving farmers with nothing left to steal, the mosques broadcast messages asking people to refrain from attacking them. The local pastoralists benefited from the presence of the ICRC, which was operating in the area to support fleeing civilians, and understood that it was to their advantage to offer support for the refugees.

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**Figure 1.6** The road to Kenya from Banta, 1988. Photograph by Catherine Besteman.
Arriving at the Kenyan border, Isha recalls, “We all just fell down and couldn’t get up.” They were met by UNHCR workers who transported them to the refugee camp at Dadaab. In a cruel twist of fate, many in their group immediately fell terribly ill and died by the score from prolonged diarrhea, including two of Caliyow Isaaq’s three wives, Faduma and Amina, along with three of Amina’s daughters. Caliyow Isaaq himself died soon thereafter. Out of the sixteen members of Caliyow Isaaq’s family who survived the trek from Somalia, seven died from diarrhea and vomiting shortly after arriving at the camp. Caliyow Isaaq’s only surviving wife, Jimcoy, and eldest son, Mohamed (who married Sheikh Axmed Nur’s daughter Xawo), took over the responsibility of caring for all six of the children left orphaned.

A few weeks after the flight of Cali Osman and Caliyow Isaaq’s group, Sheikh Axmed Nur led another secret midnight escape of a large group of about one hundred from Banta to the Kenyan border. This group included Sadiq and Maliya, a married daughter of Cali Osman and Isha. They set out late at night, separating into two groups when some of the members wanted to rest, but Darood militiamen caught the resting group after pursuing them through the bush. The militiamen poured out all their water and confiscated their food and other belongings in an effort to force them to return to Banta. Maliya managed to escape the attack and ran ahead to alert the traveling group, which included Sheikh Axmed Nur, a central target of the pursuing militiamen, to forge ahead. The second group decided to continue as well, even though they knew this choice would mean death for many. Maliya made it to the refugee camp, where she also succumbed to the deadly diarrheal disease, becoming the first of Cali Osman’s children to die.

The families of Cali Osman, Caliyow Isaaq, and Sheikh Axmed Nur were among the tens of thousands of farmers from the Jubba Valley streaming toward the Kenyan border in 1992. As the fighting between various armed militia groups raged back and forth across the Jubba Valley, militias targeted valley farmers because they lacked protection—none of their jileec Somali clan allies came to their defense—and as farmers they were food producers and thus were attacked for their food reserves by hungry but non-food-producing militias. Tens of thousands of farmers were killed throughout the valley in 1991–92 defending their food reserves. Human rights organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Africa Watch reported the appalling levels of violence directed against Jubba Valley villagers in the first years of the war. As Cali Osman, Caliyow Isaaq, and Sheikh Axmed Nur were escaping with their families from Banta, an Oxfam official called the valley “one big graveyard.”

The refugee camps offered little relief. The three families had lost many members and friends to starvation during the long trek from Banta and to
the diarrhea that overcame them so soon after their arrival in the camps. The abuse at the hands of Somalis they experienced in Banta persisted in the camps, where jareer Somalis were constantly harassed, assaulted, and insulted. For women the situation was extreme: in one of our conversations about the camps, Isha closed her eyes, remembering: “The rapes. So many rapes.” In our conversations over the years, many of my Banta friends mentioned the daily rapes, a horrific aspect of camp life repeatedly noted in reports by humanitarian and human rights agencies.

After several years in the refugee camps, news came of a UN and U.S. peacekeeping mission in Somalia, and the UNHCR, who ran the refugee camps, facilitated the repatriation of Somali Bantus to Somalia. Cali Osman was eager to return. His sons remember his frustration at his enforced dependence and subjugation in the camps and his decision that he would rather die in his own village than live on handouts as a refugee. Remembering the threats against his surviving sons, Sheikh Axmed Nur chose to remain in the camps until he felt more certain about the prospects for peace.
Cali Osman’s entire family except for the eldest children, son Ciise and daughter Rabaca, returned to the village in 1995, but discovered that “it was worse than ever,” according to Isha. A few days after their return, their fifteen-year-old daughter, Ambiya, was stolen by a Darood man—Xussein’s brother—who pointed a gun at Isha and forced her daughter away with him to another village. “I couldn’t protect my daughter,” Isha lamented, her face crumpling as she recounted her helplessness.

The much-publicized international peacekeeping mission had the contradictory effect of enhancing violence in the valley rather than reducing it, as different militias jockeyed to consolidate their control over territory. As those with weapons became increasingly murderous against villagers, Cali Osman’s family debated whether they should risk another flight through the desert to Kenya when Isha announced her intention to flee once again. After losing Ambiya at gunpoint, it was the only way she believed she could protect her remaining children. Her chance came when a Darood woman drawing water from the river in the center of Banta was attacked by a crocodile. In the ensuing hysteria, the woman’s armed relatives demanded that all the village men and boys run into the river to save her. Isha grabbed her youngest sons and fled the village. Remembering that moment, Isha’s son Idris recounted how Maxamed Gedi ran after Isha, shooting at her, “But she was faster!” Another son hid in the bushes, while Cali Osman was forced to

*Figure 1.8 Ambiya Cali Osman, center, and friends, Banta, 1988. Photograph by Jorge Acero.*
enter the river with the other village men. Isha and her youngest children united with the son who hid in the bushes, and made it all the way back to Kenya, although this trip was far worse than the previous journey because no nongovernmental organizations or pastoralists offered assistance this time. Idris shuddered as he recalled the murky, urine-filled cattle ponds that offered rare and brief respite from their terrible thirst on the brutal three-week trek. This time they were refused entry at the border, in contravention to international protocol, but after several days of hiding at the border they managed to sneak across and walk all the way back to Dagahalley, one of the refugee camps at Dadaab.

Although Isha had lost two of her children, she had managed to save five, including her orphaned nephew whom she was raising as her son. But she soon learned that she had lost her husband as well: Cali Osman did not make it out of Banta. His family never saw him again. Refugees arriving at the camps brought them the news that he had perished.
Somalia’s Civil War Is a Global Story

Civil war is always a global story. It is a story of how political divisions that become weaponized through engagements with global forces convert the nuanced differences characteristic of local life into deadly antagonisms. It is a story about how war, fostered by transnational networks, arms suppliers, external funding support, and global geopolitical connections, colonizes local inequalities and makes them murderous. It is a story about how status differences that neighbors manage and endure as part of daily life can become lethal in the context of uncertainty and violence. War arrived in Banta because a foreign-supported dictator used his access to U.S. and European foreign aid, granted because of Cold War interests, to arm local pastoralists, who then turned the weapons against their marginalized and stigmatized farmer-neighbors to acquire food, enslave labor, steal women, and claim rights to land made valuable through the expectation that international donors would return to resume their massive development projects. Somalia’s civil war is indeed complicated, but the support of the U.S. government for a merciless dictator who armed his country and fostered discord among his citizens is a reminder that while the ultimate responsibility for war and peace lies with local people, behind every story of civil war is a story of connections and influences that span the globe.

Somalia’s civil war is also a story about how terrible things have to be for farmers to abandon their land. Cali Osman, Caliyow Isaaq, and Sheikh Axmed Nur farmed the same plots their parents had farmed, harvesting enough to be able to marry several wives and support many children and grandchildren. Each man had earned a strong local reputation for prowess in valued skills—poetry and music, carpentry, healing and religion—in addition to wisdom, yet the men decided, together with their wives, to abandon their homes and risk a brutal journey with their children and grandchildren through the desert to Kenya, a flight that cost each family beloved members and that ultimately resulted in the dispersal of survivors between Somalia, Kenyan refugee camps, and throughout the United States.

Finally, Somalia’s civil war is a story of the contemporary responsibilities and forms of mutuality wrought by the hierarchical historical engagements of the slave trade, colonization, and foreign aid. The connections and confrontations among the international actors who built, shaped, or profited from slavery, colonialism, Cold War patronage, and wartime intervention provoke contemporary questions about the relationships between Somali slave descendants and their pastoralist neighbors and between all Somalis and their former colonizers and Cold War patrons. If disengagement from Africa’s violence is no longer an option in a globalized world, as Paul Richards argues in
this chapter’s epigraph, that is because Africa’s violence is produced through its global entanglements. If localized violence has global origins, how is responsibility for the consequences of violence to be managed?

Writing about the refusal of French intellectuals to engage moral post-colonial questions of identity and difference because of their unwillingness to acknowledge the deep and profoundly complex connections of colonialism, Achille Mbembe cautions that, through slavery and colonialism, “the inhabitants of the earth were juxtaposed or brought together in a unity that is both emblematic and problematic. We are thus compelled, through these events, to pursue the question of all possible conditions of an authentic human encounter. . . . This encounter must begin through reciprocal disorientation.”19 “Reciprocal disorientation” is a scholarly phrase, perhaps, but an apt description of the decades following the flight of Somalis and Somali Bantus from Somalia to Kenya to Lewiston, as they reunited under very different circumstances in places of refuge, and as their dislocations brought them into close and intimate encounters with the American citizens whose taxes helped to fund American Cold War patronage, development schemes, and military interventions that destabilized their homeland. The following chapters follow them on their journey.