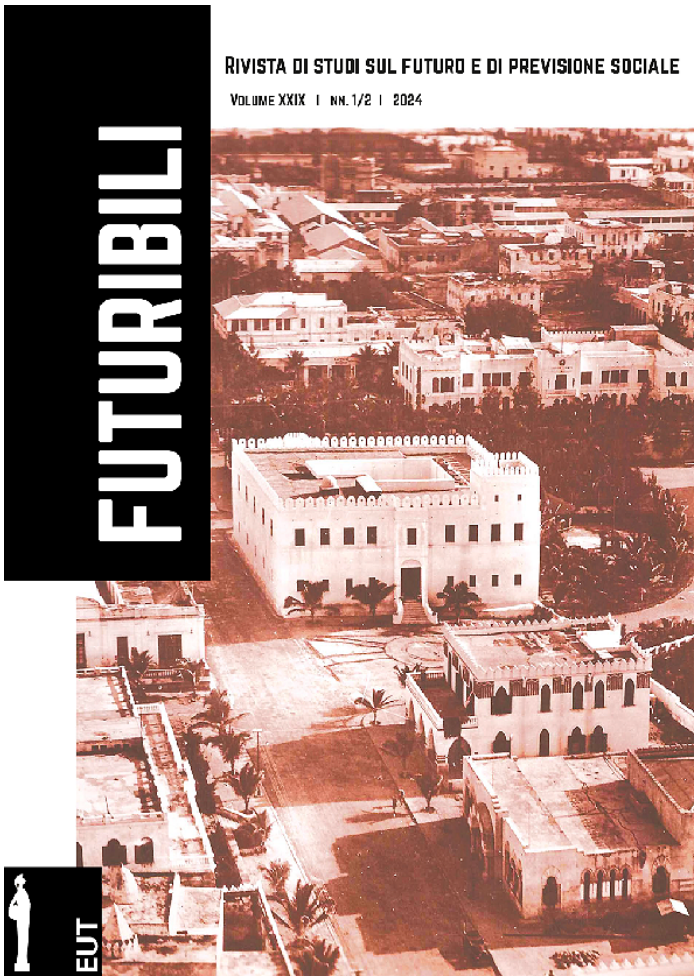


Safeguarding Mogadishu's Cultural Heritage at the Complex Intersection of Political Rivalry and Clan Identity

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Abstract: In the complex socio-political context of Somalia, historic buildings, primarily located in Mogadishu and coastal cities such as Marka, Brava, and Kismayo, have frequent- ly been destroyed and appear destined to become potential sources of conflict between the various clans in the future. On the heritage front, therefore, a centuries-old cultural problem arises, primarily linked to the differences between the nomadic traditions of some clans, more inclined to preserve knowledge related to the landscape, natural factors, local materials, and the local vocations (intangible heritage), and the sedentary traditions of other clans, decidedly more inclined to protect the urban environment and its monumental buildings (built heritage). It's impossible, if not anachronistic, to allow one trend to prevail over the other, since the only viable path — even with a view to achieving peace between the various political factions currently in power — is to establish a dialogue between the various demands that characterize these traditions in order to build a common cultural capital to pass on to the Somalis of tomorrow.

Keywords: *Cultural heritage, Territory, Intangible heritage, War, Urban planning*

Countless pages have been written on the definition of *cultural heritage*, and numerous scholars have sought to classify the artefacts, beliefs, knowledge, sentiments, literature, languages, and other elements that a given society inherits from the past, transforming them into valuable vehicles for the transmission of historical knowledge. However, despite UNESCO's significant contribution[1] to this field, no universally accepted definition has yet emerged that clearly delineates the concept.

The term *cultural heritage* has gradually acquired a broad meaning, effectively serving as an umbrella term encompassing both cultural property and landscape assets. The former refers specifically to assets of artistic, historical, archaeological, ethno-anthropological, archival, and bibliographical interest, including anything legally recognised as evidence of civilisational value. The latter, by contrast, encompasses assets that embody the historical, cultural, natural, morphological, and aesthetic values of a given territory, insofar as the landscape is an expression of identity "whose character derives from the action of natural and human factors and their interrelationships".

Once the significance and scope of this "heterogeneous and complex" body of cultural heritage, shaped by a community's culture, have been recognised, national and international institutions must assume responsibility for its protection on two fronts: ensuring its integrity, preservation, and accessibility to the community while simultaneously developing the body of knowledge and expertise necessary to safeguard and promote the historical, artistic, and archaeological heritage that constitutes a fundamental component of our shared social consciousness.

It must be borne in mind, however, that throughout history, during armed conflicts, the destruction of works of art and the demolition of buildings, urban spaces, or sites symbolic of a people's identity have consistently served as key means of annihilating an enemy. One need only consider how, throughout history, the destruction and looting of churches, mosques, palaces, and museums have recurred in an almost unbroken chain.

And perhaps now more than ever, in certain parts of the world, we are witnessing operations of a similar nature which, under the pretext of interstate conflict, seek to obliterate the traces of past civilisations with unprecedented violence. In other words, the destruction of monumental buildings, works of art, or evidence of an "alternative" spirituality has effectively become a weapon of war deployed against specific peoples to erase both their collective memory and the tangible expressions of their cultural diversity. To cite just a few examples of such targeted acts of devastation, we may recall deliberate acts of destruction that have resulted, among other things, in the destruction or severe damage of seven Muslim mausoleums in Timbuktu, Mali; three ancient Assyrian cities—Nineveh, Khorsabad, and Nimrud—in present-day Iraq; more than 300 archaeological sites between Aleppo and Palmyra in Syria; and the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan.

In an effort to counter such practices, while also taking into account the wars that have ravaged the international scene in recent years, we may invoke, alongside a clear and unequivocal condemnation of these acts, the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, adopted at The Hague on 14 May 1954[2] and supplemented by the Second Protocol of 26 March 1999.[3] The Convention states: "Any damage to cultural property, regardless of the people to whom it belongs, constitutes damage to the cultural heritage of all humanity, since every people contributes to world culture".

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[1] UNESCO's mission is to 'promote, through relations amongst the peoples of the world in the fields of education, science and culture, the objectives of international peace and the common welfare of humankind' (see Preamble, UNESCO Constitution).

[2] Available at: https://unesco.cultura.gov.it/en/hague-convention/

[3] Available at: https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/second-protocol-hague-convention-1954-protection-cultural-property-event-armed-conflict

Amid the uncertainty and disorientation caused by these challenging times, we may also draw on certain principles set out in *UNESCO's Action Plan on Cultural Diversity*.[4] On this basis, once the necessary process of recognising a site's outstanding universal value has been completed, it may be inscribed on the World Heritage List, thereby helping to protect it against the risk of destruction. At present, the List of World Heritage in Danger includes 39 cultural sites, concentrated mainly in Saharan and Mediterranean Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia.

This is, of course, only a "minimal" bulwark which, in the absence of any system of sanctions, relies exclusively on solidarity among intellectuals, dialogue with local elites, and the development of fragile prospects for cooperation based on mutual interests. Indeed, the very same states that signed the Hague Convention failed to take any effective action to prevent, for example, the destruction of the Baghdad Museum in 2003 or the looting of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo in January 2011.

Moreover, we must not forget that, for centuries, we too have destroyed pagan temples and converted them into churches; allowed princely palaces, libraries, and historical archives to fall into ruin; and engaged in extensive plundering on our own soil. Ancient castles were demolished to make way for new ones; defensive walls, once deemed useless, were dismantled to provide building materials for houses; and the oldest frescoes were whitewashed or covered with more recent paintings. Many of the Romanesque sculptures that we now preserve reverently in our museums were, over the centuries, removed from pulpits, façades, and altars, discarded, and reused as mere rubble in the construction of bridges, walls, ramparts, and embankments.

Drawing on documentation gathered over approximately fifteen years from various public and private archives, a group of Somali and Italian scholars has, since 2016, sought to organise a series of initiatives aimed at raising awareness of Mogadishu's architectural and urban heritage, which has also suffered extensive devastation as a result of the civil war and remains largely overlooked. The main components of this joint project, which seeks to encourage local authorities to preserve the few surviving examples of this heritage, were a photographic exhibition entitled *Mogadishu and Its Urban Development Through History: Pages of the City's History*,[5] comprising 47 panels, and an accompanying catalogue published in Italian, Somali, and English, which has since reached its second edition.[6]

In addition to pursuing the goal of building a digital archive of Somalia's cultural heritage, featuring reproductions of photographic, cartographic, and video materials held in various archives across Italy, the research group behind the initiative—supported by several academic institutions[7] and administrative bodies in both countries[8] —has nurtured, and continues to nurture, a twofold hope: first, to prevent further

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[4] Adopted unanimously as part of the *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* during the 31st session of the UNESCO General Conference, Paris, 2 November 2001. Available at:
https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/universal-declaration-cultural-diversity

[5] The exhibition, curated by Gabriella Restaino and Maria Spina, was first held in 2018 at Mogadishu Town Hall. It was subsequently hosted: in 2019, at the School of Architecture and Design of the University of Camerino in Ascoli Piceno; in 2024, at Magazzino 26 in the Old Port of Trieste; and in 2025, in the Reading Room of the Pordenone Public Library.

[6] Khalid Mao Abdulkadir, Gabriella Restaino, Maria Spina (eds.), *Mogadiscio e la sua evoluzione storico-urbanistica: pagine di storia della città. Catalogo della mostra / Muqdisho iyo taariikhda dhismaheeda: bogag taariikh magaalo. Kataalogga Bandhigga / Mogadishu and its urban development through history: pages of the city's history. Exhibition catalogue,* Gangemi international, Mogadiscio 2020 [1ª ed.]; Ahmed Faghi Elmi, Gabriella Restaino, Maria Spina (eds.), *Mogadiscio e la sua evoluzione storico-urbanistica: pagine di storia della città. Catalogo della mostra / Muqdisho iyo taariikhda dhismaheeda: bogag taariikh magaalo. Kataalogga Bandhigga / Mogadishu and its urban development through history: pages of the city's history. Exhibition catalogue,* Luglioprint, Trieste 2024 [2ª ed.].

[7] Somali National University; Somali Academy of Sciences, Culture and Arts; Centre for Somali Studies, Roma Tre University; University of Trieste; Postgraduate School of Architectural and Landscape Heritage, "Sapienza" University of Rome; Historical Archives, University of Bologna; Department of Architecture and Design, Turin Polytechnic; "Eduardo Vittoria" University School of Architecture and Design, University of Camerino; Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Milan Polytechnic; University of Udine.

[8] Italian Embassy in Mogadishu; Italian Agency for Development Cooperation; Benaadir Region; Autonomous Region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia; Municipality of Trieste.

destruction of the buildings that still stand in the historic centre of the capital and, second, to curb property speculation by major international companies.

Indeed, the devastating effects of the war have recently been compounded by the impact of property development, particularly in the central areas of Mogadishu, where most of the surviving medieval buildings are concentrated. In this regard, the Italian journalist Pier Maria Mazzola, a keen observer of African affairs, writes: "Recent years have, however, seen the return of many Somalis from abroad and a revival of economic, social and cultural life: in 2019, for example, the first graduates emerged from the re-established Somali National University […]. This revival has been accompanied by a property boom, which has, as it were, taken it upon itself to finish the work of the war—that is, to erase even the last vestiges of historic buildings".[9]

Given that a large proportion of the Somali population (around 75 per cent) is under the age of thirty-five and has therefore never had the opportunity to experience the city and its monuments before they were defaced or destroyed during the civil war that broke out in 1991, and that this assault on cultural heritage spared neither ancient private manuscripts nor the collections of the National Museum, reconstructing the memory of this heritage, even in broad outline, is undoubtedly a priority. This is particularly important for the local community and younger generations, and for all those who have assumed the responsibility of transmitting the cultural legacy of this important African country to future generations.

The geographical coordinates of the Somali heritage that has "escaped" looting were provided to us by Khalid Mao Abdulkadir, one of the most generous contributors to the research group, who writes as follows: "The protection of historical, archaeological and natural heritage must extend to all cities in Somalia where there are buildings of historical significance and archaeological sites such as the rock paintings at Laas Gheel (near Hargeisa), the historic centres of Warshiiq, Jaziira, Ghendershe, Marka, Brava and Kismayo, and the archaeological ruins on the Bajuuni Islands, in Sanaag and other regions of Somalia. The aim is to begin establishing a centre in Mogadishu to coordinate this initiative".[10] As for Mogadishu, the undisputed nerve centre of Banaadir and a melting pot of diverse cultures and ethnic groups, Nuredin Hagi Scikei offers a particularly authoritative historical account: "[the city] developed over the course of approximately ten centuries into two distinct areas, enclosed within a single set of walls but each devoted to different economic activities. Hamar-Weyne, located near the main gate of the walled city, was primarily dedicated to the trade in livestock (goats and camels) and goods from southern Ethiopia. Shingaani, by contrast, was situated adjacent to an area where sailing ships could anchor offshore while waiting to load and unload goods, even in rough seas. It served as a major hub where goods and spices arriving from various countries bordering the Indian Ocean were sorted and dispatched inland […]. It was only during the early period of Italian colonisation that the coastal city's millennia-old urban structure underwent changes which, however, did not significantly alter the distinctive identity of the historic town". [11]

The inclusion of Mogadishu within the framework of a *maritime cultural landscape*—a concept proposed by Christer Westerdahl as early as 1978 and applicable, in his view, to all coastal regions bordering the Indian Ocean—undoubtedly broadens our understanding of the city's historical heritage. As E. Falt observes: "The Indian Ocean is one of the few regions in the world where the concept of a 'maritime cultural landscape' can be applied and understood […]. Westerdahl uses the term to refer to the distinctive ways in which communities shape maritime spaces through settlement, mobility and forms of exchange. Indeed, the Indian Ocean routes are characterised by distinctive architectural features and archaeological sites; local traditions associated with shipbuilding, travel and navigation; and narratives reflecting the diverse

[9] P.M. Mazzola*, Mogadiscio ritrovata*, in «Africa», 1° febbraio 2021. Available at: https://www.africarivista.it/mogadiscio-ritrovata/179979/ (text published in Italian).
[10] K.M. Abdulkadir, "Creation of a Center for the Protection and Recovery of Historical, Archaeological and Natural Heritage of Somalia", in Elmi, Restaino, Spina (eds.), *Mogadishu and its urban development through history: pages of the city's history* cit. p.
[11] For in-depth research on the buildings of the medieval city, see: N. Hagi Scikei, *Exploring the Old Stone Town of Mogadishu*, Cambridge Scholars, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2017.

experiences of maritime communities. In other words, a maritime cultural landscape is a holistic concept encompassing both the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of coastal communities."[12]

Nevertheless, any programme aimed at safeguarding Somalia's cultural heritage, particularly its built heritage, must take into account three factors that have profoundly shaped the country's traditional social fabric. First, Somali society is fundamentally organised around clan structures. Second, a significant proportion of its clans have traditionally been associated with nomadic ways of life. Third, pastoralism has played a major role not only in the country's inland regions, particularly in the north, but also within the urban setting of Mogadishu itself. This last aspect is especially significant, as the city's history is generally understood to be rooted primarily in a tradition of settled urban life, in contrast to the pastoral and nomadic cultures that have also contributed to shaping Somali society.

It is therefore with these internal conflicts that we must begin, if we are to address the challenges of safeguarding Mogadishu's architectural heritage, as Nuredin Hagi Scikei argues: "Preserving historic buildings means raising emotional issues, because, unfortunately, the rivalry between clans is not yet over".[13]
Any programme aimed at protecting the built heritage of Mogadishu and Somalia's other historic centres must therefore seek to foster a new form of dialogue, not only among scholars from different social backgrounds, but also between those belonging to traditionally 'opposing' camps.

More than a quarter of a century has passed since the pastoral-nomadic cultural hegemony—which Abdallah Omar Mansur also described in the early 1990s[14] —contributed to marginalising the Reer Xamar in the capital and the Banaadiri in the coastal towns. If the aim is to "promote Somali culture, language and literature, as well as to reform the education system to align it with the objectives of nation-building", new goals must be established. Above all, it is necessary to move beyond a long-standing divide rooted in the differences between the nomadic traditions of certain clans, perhaps more closely associated with the preservation of knowledge relating to the landscape, natural resources and the productive potential of the land—that is, *intangible heritage*—and the sedentary traditions of other clans, more directly associated with the protection of the urban environment and its monumental buildings, or *tangible heritage*.

It would be impossible, if not anachronistic, to privilege one of these cultural orientations over the other. The only viable way forward is to reflect collectively on the interpretative complexity of the many cultural expressions that constitute this 'shared heritage', to be passed on to future generations of Somalis. This means identifying its most significant elements, commonalities and differences, its historical layers and transformations, and even the question of its intellectual 'ownership'. Only through such an inclusive approach can this heritage be effectively safeguarded against the risk of oblivion.

[12] E. Falt, The Indian Ocean as a Maritime Cultural Landscape and Heritage Route, in Stéphane Pradines and Farouk Topan (eds.), Muslim Cultures of the Indian Ocean: Diversity and Pluralism, Past and Present, Edinburgh University Press and The Aga Khan University, Edinburgh, 2023, pp. 183–184.
[13] N. Hagi Scikei, "Reflections on the Defense of Somalia's Historical Heritage", in Elmi, Restaino, Spina (eds.), *Mogadishu and its urban development through history: pages of the city's history* cit. p. 14.
[14] A.O. Mansur, "Barre the Camel Driver", in *Il Manifesto*, 13 January 1991 (text published in Italian).