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Military Conflict in Northern Somalia, Anthropological (Online) Activism and a Libel Case

Fig. 1 Screenshot 2023-06-18 at 12-43-11 auf Twitter

In 2023, while actively engaging in social media debates on the escalation of military conflict in northern Somalia, where I had conducted many years of ethnographic research, I was called “paedophile” by a well-known Somali-born British citizen and anti-FGM activist called Nimco Ali. How could this happen, what were the consequences and what could be learned from that regarding anthropological

activism?

My research background

I started researching conflict and identity in northern Somalia, in Somaliland (northwest), Puntland (northeast) and in-between, in 2002. Criss-crossing the region extensively for years, I realized various "political identities" (Mamdani 2001) emerging which were based on genealogical ties, but also on certain interpretations of regional history and biographical experiences (Hoehne 2006). Those political identities were in important regards opposed to each other. While, as a rule, people in the centre of Somaliland positioned themselves as "Somalilanders", claiming independence from Somalia, people in the east, especially in the area between Buuhoodle, Lasanod and Badhan, typically adhered to Somali unity against Somaliland secessionism. My research documented the expressions (and continuous developments) of these identities in different ways, over years. Yet, fortunately, for a long time, no political leader tried to enforce such visions (secessionist or unionist) across the region.

The conflict in 2023

This changed in early 2023, when the government of Somaliland reacted to a popular unionist uprising in Lasanod by attacking the town. Within days, hundreds of people were injured or killed, many of them civilians. I started using my (until then rather dormant) Twitter/X account to publish information about the situation. Initially my aim was to put the conflict into perspective, based on my earlier research. As the conflict escalated, I focussed on collecting information on victims in town. My tweets on the situation in and around Lasanod soon generated considerable attention among Somalis and beyond, including international organisations and policy makers. I was contacted by the World Bank, by the EU mission to the Horn of Africa and the US embassies in Mogadishu and Djibouti to share my insights. Many of my updates on casualties and attacks e.g. on hospitals were eventually corroborated

by other sources like Amnesty International (2023) or MSF (2023). To avoid one-sidedness, I also called my contacts in the centre of Somaliland. But this became increasingly difficult. Emotions were flying high given there were numerous victims among the forces on both sides. Through my activism, it seems, I turned into an "ally" of the one side and an "enemy" of the other, in an area in which, in the past, I had very good and warm contacts on all sides (to the degree that some colleagues perceived me as a "Somaliland-scholar").

How does one act ethically correct in such a situation? In my view, I had to stay true to my sources, especially my ethnography from the early 2000s, which showed that people in the eastern peripheries of "Somaliland" had rejected secession decades ago. This would also not change, in my assessment, through violently attacking them, as the Somaliland government did in 2023. I thus advocated against the violent politics of Somaliland. I also engaged those on Twitter/X who legitimated the attacks on Lasanod by (falsely) claiming that "terrorists" were behind the anti-Somaliland uprising. My own, older data showed that the opposition by people e.g. in Lasanod and Buuhoodle, long pre-dated the founding of Al Shabaab (which is the major "terrorist" group in the Somali territories). Besides, the insurgents in Lasanod in 2023 received some military and logistic support from the Puntland administration in the northeast (to which people in Lasanod also had close genealogical ties) and from parts of the Somali government in Mogadishu; both of these supporting parties were actively fighting Al Shabaab in their respective areas of influence. In my tweets I tried to undermine the "counter-terrorism"-narrative that had already done much harm across the Somali territories (Hoehne 2009).

The libel case

In this context, Nimco Ali (@NimkoAli on Twitter/X) – a widely known anti-FGM and women's rights campaigner based in the UK, the CEO of the Five Foundation (defending women and girls especially in the Horn of Africa), a close friend of Boris Johnson's wife Carrie, a commentator in the London Evening Standard, a book

author, and a bearer of an Order of the British Empire (OBE) – posted on X in late March 2023 to her 50k followers: "So this @HoehneVirgil [my Twitter handle] is a paedophile who was kicked out of Somaliland for abusing girls. Please let's stop engaging with this disgusting man." While she was not the first one who called me names including "pedo" in the context of the conflict in 2023, she was the one with the most followers and her tweets had by far the widest reach. Also her standing as women's and girls' rights defender lent weight to her accusations. From her other tweets, however, it could be easily seen that Nimco was a strong Somaliland supporter, who was justifying the attacks on Lasanod and endorsed the "terrorist" narrative mentioned above. She even criticised the UK government for calling upon Somaliland for a cessation of hostilities. Her statement against me was clearly aimed at shutting up a critical voice.

Nimco Ali's allegations caused a massive reaction, and many who, like her, sided with Somaliland used them to attack me online. Some even went so far as to directly contact my (then) university in Leipzig, Germany, outlining, sometimes in pornographic style, my alleged "misconduct" during my earlier field research. Such emails were sent to my colleagues at the Institute for Social Anthropology, but also to other professors (whose contact details were collected online) and to the rector of the University of Leipzig. These were clear attempts to ruin my reputation and to destroy my livelihood as an academic. In June 2023, the personal assistant of the university rector and the speaker of the university got in contact with me and asked for clarifications on the matter. They advised me to contact HateAid in Berlin, which I did. I received some psycho-social counselling from them. I was also summoned by a co-rector of the university who recommended I should let my online-engagement rest and rather focus on writing a book. The latter was not helpful advise in my eyes. I felt that I had the responsibility to make my knowledge relevant in the face of an unfolding drama. Online activism seemed to be the way to do that at that moment.

The violence ended on 25 August 2023, when the militias defending Lasanod drove

the Somaliland forces out of their positions around the city and chased them all the way to Oog, a village 80 kilometres west of Lasanod. There, a frontline was established. Subsequently, a new unionist administration called “North-East State” was set up in an around Lasanod, endorsed by the Somali government in Mogadishu.

Given the gravity of Nimco Ali’s allegations, and the repercussions her tweets had had, I decided to take legal action against her in early 2024. She tried to delay and divert the case, which dragged on for two years (producing considerable costs of more than 200.000 Euro on my side alone, luckily covered by my legal insurance). But eventually she had to agree on mediation, which ended in a formal and legally binding agreement. As part of this, Nimco Ali agreed to publish the following statement on Monday, 29 June 2026, on her Twitter/X account (where it has to stay for two years, albeit it is by now watered down her timeline):

“In a series of Tweets on 28 March 2023 I published gravely defamatory allegations about Dr Markus Höhne (@HoehneVirgil) who is a social anthropologist specialising in Somali affairs. I alleged that Dr Höhne was a paedophile who was kicked out of Somaliland for abusing girls. At the time of the tweets, I had been misinformed by third parties about these allegations, which I now accept are entirely false. Dr Höhne is not guilty of the conduct I alleged against him, and was not expelled from Somaliland for any such conduct. I wish to apologise unreservedly to Dr Höhne for the serious reputational damage and distress which my Tweets have caused him. I have agreed to pay him substantial compensation.”

The settlement was heard in open court in London in early July and remains thus on public record.

Lessons for anthropological activism

I would draw three conclusions from this episode. First, it is clear, in my view, that anthropological activism derives from solid field research and critical analysis of

ethnographic data. Had I not done extensive field research in northern Somalia over years, I would not have dared to position myself publicly and firmly in a highly contested situation. The war over Lasanod was waged on the ground, but also online (like many wars in recent years). Online activism by all sides was a vital part of it. Not only were funds raised by Somali diaspora groups to support the war effort financially (especially the militias defending Lasanod were massively depending on remittances); but online actors also sought to exercise political influence by providing information and interpretations and thus shaping the perceptions of external actors about the conflict. Based on my ethnographic knowledge, which made me an "expert" in the eyes of many non-Somali and Somali actors, I entered this dynamic process online. It was very difficult to keep a distanced position. Even referring to some of my long-published articles, which outlined the historical background of the conflict, became highly politicized and triggered increasingly harsh reactions in 2023. When I resorted to daily reporting on dynamics of war including triangulated casualty figures (especially referring to casualties in Lasanod, where I had my most reliable sources) I was considered a direct party to the war by some – and treated accordingly. While I was certain about my expertise (as certain as one could be as social anthropologist who was socialized with the "writing culture"-debate and reflections on the crisis of representation and the partiality of knowledge), I knew that I was most likely also manipulated by sources close to me. Clearly, I ran the risk of being used by my acquaintances in Lasanod. The more the number of my followers grew on Twitter/X (from some 60 in January 2023 to some 8000 in August 2023) the more I felt I had to be careful. Sometimes I chose not to publish information I received or to wait until I had not twice but triple checked data. Besides, I also tried to reach out to the Somaliland side, where I had very few acquaintances and friends left who would talk to me. There were also moments when I really thought I was completely wrong about all my engagement, especially when the above mentioned pedophile-accusation gained traction online. What kept me engaging was first, feedback from my long-standing contacts in the field, whom I trusted (based on relations going back 20 years) and second, expressions of

solidarity across various camps online. Even some who were actually quite intensively and visibly supporting Somaliland publicly stated that the accusations against me were libelous and had overstepped a boundary. This gave me back some confidence.

Second, this episode touches on wider issues of research ethics and anthropological activism. It was, in my view, clarified in the debate between Scheper-Hughes (1995) and Teitelbaum (2019), (with Luisa Schneider [2023] adding further important insights), that morals and ethics in anthropology are conceptually separate. Morals largely concern everyday encounters e.g. during field research; ethics touch on more abstract principles of doing research and dealing with its outcomes. In my case, outlined above, morals and ethics were not only separate; they clearly collided. I took it as morally correct to speak out on the conflict dynamics in northern Somalia in 2023. Based on long-standing ethnographic work I wanted to add to the understanding of the situation. Ethically, however, the dilemma was that my activism brought me into cross-hairs with a part of my field. I became an "enemy" of many of my (former) interlocutors, some of whom I previously had considered close friends over many years. They accused me of being partial and biased (I will come back to that below). In their view I worked against them, while I – morally correct, I would suggest – called out the violence of "their" army against people in Lasanod, where I also had close research partners and friends.

Third, the episode shows that by engaging online in a field characterized by escalating military conflict, anthropologists become part of what Chonka (2026) and Norman (2026) recently framed as "participatory" respectively "participative" warfare. Reactions to my tweets showed me that international actors including the US embassy in Mogadishu and the EU mission in the Horn of Africa were taking notice of my updates. I consciously used this kind of attention to amplify my interpretations of the events. I did this on basis of well-founded ethnographic research, which, however, was still partial. My view is that to be able to engage as

activist in a conflict situation, one needs to take responsibility as author. I relied on my interpretations of the situation (in 2023); they were backed by substantial ethnographic data that had been collected from 2002 onward; and my earlier analyses had gone through critical debates (by peer-reviewers and contacts in the field). All of this provided the ground to stand on, which was still partial at a higher theoretical level. But this partiality is, as we know, all we have. And obviously, my online activism had an impact. In reaction, those differing with me took recourse to ever more "lethal" weapons in social media discourse. The most brutal attempt to "finish me off" came from Nimco Ali. She, as defender of women's and girls' rights who indeed also works to raise awareness about "child abuse", weaponized the accusation "pedophile" without solid proof. She put her own credibility as a rights activist at risk by engaging in unchecked allegations. It was only due to the fact that I had a solid legal insurance that agreed to support me in this that I could switch from the virtual battlefield to concrete legal proceedings in the UK, where Nimco Ali lived, and defend myself against the allegations equaling character assassination. As anthropologist we live temporarily in the field; but we often remain in contact with people in the field for years or decades, entangled in complex social relations (de Regt 2015). However, especially in an age of social media, we have to consider how the field can also consume us in so far not much reflected ways.

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