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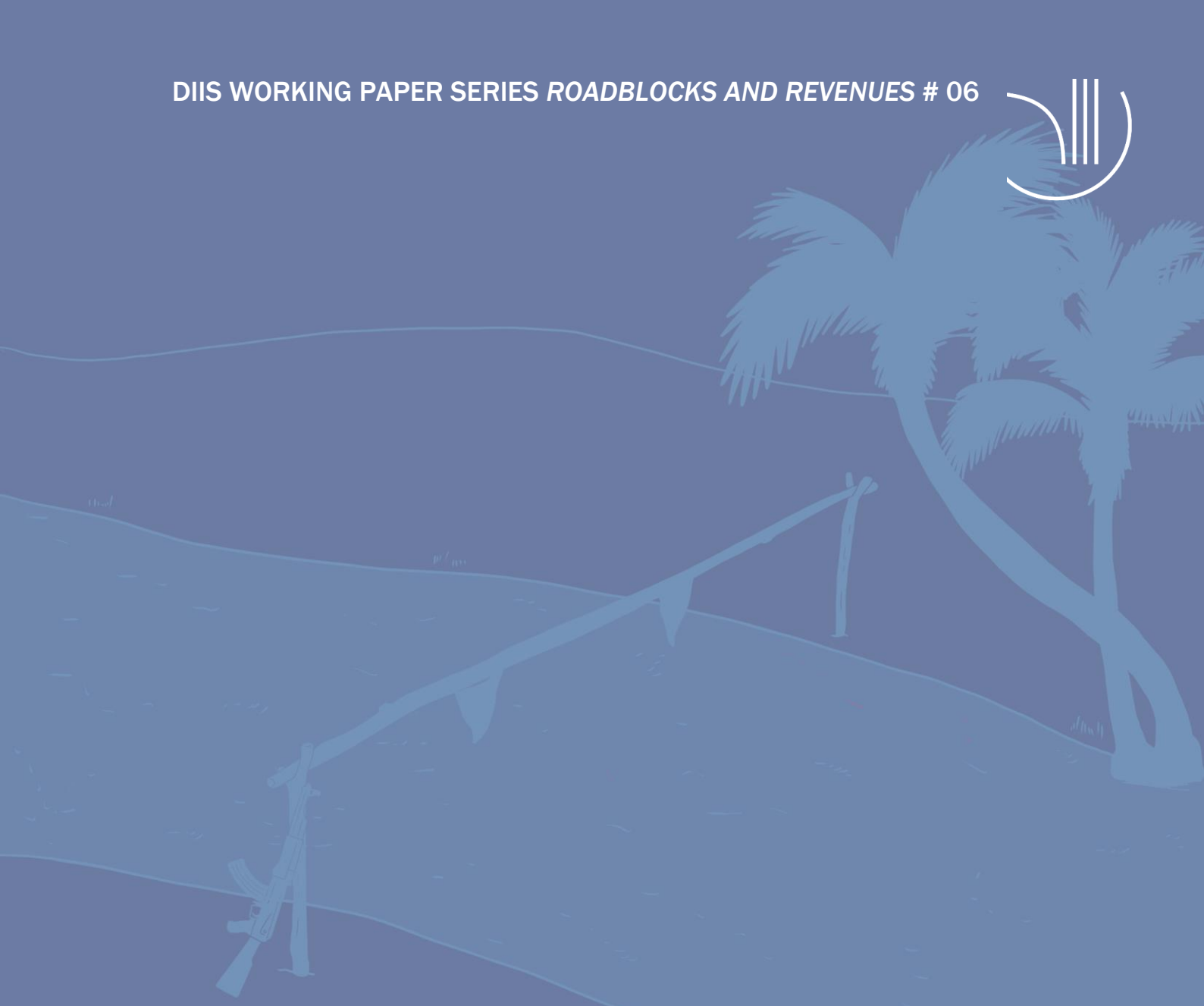

ISBAARO: CHECKPOINTS AND WORLD-MAKING BEYOND THE STATE

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Abdirahman Edle, Jethro Norman and Peer Schouten

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ISBAARO: CHECKPOINTS AND WORLD-MAKING BEYOND THE STATE

Abdirahman Edle, Jethro Norman and Peer Schouten

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dynamics of checkpoint authority in Somalia, focusing on how kinship, mobility and checkpoint practices intersect to shape political and social orders. The paper challenges the notion, gaining traction in the literature on taxation and conflict, that checkpoint governance is either an expression of state-like power or indicative of the state's absence. Instead, it argues that checkpoints in Somalia—or *isbaaro* as they are locally called—are deeply embedded in the social fabric of clan society, where the practice of *abanship*—the brokerage of passage through clan territory—plays a crucial role. This brokerage not only facilitates trade but also reinforces clan identity and social differentiation. Drawing on participatory cartography and semi-structured interviews with over 80 Somali road users, we contend that checkpoints serve as sites of social navigation and identity formation, reflecting broader historical and contemporary struggles over mobility and trade. We propose that 'clan capital', or standing within clan society, is key to brokering passage along checkpoints, but genealogical differences also become accentuated at checkpoints, and clan formations reinforced and reshaped in struggles over checkpoint rents. We understand this dynamic through the principle of schismogenesis—or the process of social division and differentiation—whereby fiscal disagreements are a central driver for kinship groups to differentiate themselves from one another, resulting in new political forms and identities. We conclude that checkpoints are sites where we can observe some of the more complex and fluctuating political dynamics of the Somali territories that have long confounded analysts, international practitioners and policymakers. While we focus empirically on the case of Somalia, we expect our analysis to resonate in other similar settings where capital concentrates in the trade sector and state authority is weak.

INTRODUCTION

Checkpoints of the Salafist militant organisation Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, better known as al-Shabaab, occupy a curiously central place in debates on political order in areas of contested statehood. The reason is that despite being a rebel group opposing the internationally recognised Somali government, al-Shabaab seems more proficient in imposing a state-like regime of mobility along roads under its control. It charges a single—but hefty—transit tax at the first of the group's roadblocks one encounters at the entry-point to their regional administration (*wiyaalaat*), and issues a receipt that grants free passage along subsequent al-Shabaab checkpoints (i.e. Badahur, 2022; Hiraal Institute, 2018, 2020). By contrast, portions of roads not under the armed group's control are marked by ever-shifting strings of nominally government-affiliated clan militia checkpoints, each passage involving long-lasting haggling and possible abuses (Schouten, 2023).

This contrast has been central to two separate if interlocking discussions. First, it has led counterinsurgency experts to portray al-Shabaab as a 'government-in-waiting', a 'proto-state' (e.g. Anzalone, 2021; Dorrie, 2014; Lia, 2015), while others use it to make more intricate arguments about the group's checkpoint taxation as a reflection of 'stateness', by approaching it as emblematic of 'rebel governance' (i.e. Ahmad et al., 2022; Skjelderup, 2020; Yesiltas and Shihundu, 2024). Second, al-Shabaab's checkpoint regime is an oft-cited example in the broader literature on trade, taxation and conflict in Africa, which underscores the mutually co-constitutive relations between trade facilitation and state formation—whether by states or their detractors (Ahmad, 2014; Hagmann and Stepputat, 2023). This work has been important in showing that political order in conflict doesn't need to revolve around claims of exclusive territorial control, but can also and indeed principally revolve around logistical space—the trade routes where concentrated wealth circulates (cf. the introduction to this Special Issue). Schouten (2022) for instance argues that, especially in contexts where wealth concentrates in trade, checkpoints embody an intuitive form of state-making by aspiring rulers—or, as Hagmann and Stepputat (2023) neatly summarise: 'trade makes states'. Where both debates agree, in other words, is that even in cases where checkpoints are operated by non-state actors and thus don't support the practical extension of state agencies, they are still imbricated with the extension of state-*like* authority through rudimentary forms of taxation or protection rackets that are said to embody the naked bottom line of statecraft (e.g. Bandula-Irwin et al., 2022; Hoffmann et al., 2016).

At the heart of the emerging debate on checkpoints, trade and state formation in conflict thus sits a fundamental equation of checkpoints with statehood—an equation often used implicitly as a yardstick against which al-Shabaab excels and government affiliated militia dramatically fall short. This paper challenges this equation. Drawing from a more anthropologically inflected register, we argue that checkpointing as a practice isn't reducible to attempts to enact state-like authority, and figures in a much broader repertoire of world-making struggles. In Somalia—our case in this paper—feuds over narrow points of passage along trade routes

have historically preceded modern state-making efforts, and in many of these struggles, whether historical or contemporary, kinship relations are centrally at stake. Connecting historical and contemporary struggles over circulation, we propose, is the Somali institution of *abanship*—the brokerage of passage through clan territory—which revolves around translating claims to jurisdiction over passage into 'clan capital', or standing in clan society. Because Somali clan society is radically acephalous, competition over clan capital is fierce and constant, and the possibility to obtain resources associated to it drive differentiation between lineages in clan society. In a society in which mobility is everything, checkpoints and the broader politics of passage are sites par excellence of schismogenesis, or the process of the formation and differentiation of social collectives.

Schismogenesis, we propose, unfolds at checkpoints through the entwined struggles over clan capital and checkpoint rents. While clan identity may be fluid in day-to-day affairs, making a claim to transit taxes from outsiders requires articulation of belonging to determine the terms of passage. 'Othering' is key to the production of authority and rents at checkpoints, as making others into a taxable object is contingent on social differentiation; vice versa, 'kinshipping' or underscoring genealogical ties with roadblock operators is key for those who pass a checkpoint to smoothen passage—crucially, both othering and kinshipping reinforce the importance of clan identity for the politics of passage and trade more generally. In the context of predominantly mobility-based livelihoods and a concentration of wealth in the trade sector, Somali checkpoints—or *isbaaro* as they are locally called—are points of reiteration, contestation and production of collective identity par excellence as they are among the defining meeting places between mobile strangers and 'locals' claiming power over passage. Checkpoints can thus be likened to 'interstitial frontiers' (Kopytoff, 1987) at which 'circulation struggles' (Clover, 2016) take place which not only concern the terms of passage and the distribution of trade rents but also the production and transformation of political identities, which in the Somali context has meant kin-based identities.

As we will discuss, this dynamic in East Africa can be traced back to at least the 19th century, in which an intensification of long-distance caravan trade in Africa accelerated processes of community-based claim-making and ethnogenesis along the trade routes. Constant flows of strangers begot a demand for coherent and stable interfaces of interaction with local communities as well as predictable terms of passage, prompting the reinvention of communities along caravan routes, as well as struggles among and between communities over their respective jurisdiction over portions of routes. The demands of abanship—or clan-based brokerage—in Somali East Africa strongly circumscribed the domination of caravan trade by foreign merchants, and today still places limits on the participation of outsiders in the profitable transport sector, yet the wealth concentrated in this sector drives often violent processes of social formation and differentiation. Of course, in foregrounding this logic, we do not purport to dismiss the association between checkpoints and state-making altogether by claiming that checkpoint dynamics are uniquely driven by kinship logics. Rather, we wish to suggest that checkpoints are perfect examples of 'twilight institutions' (Lund, 2006) which may vehiculate state-making purposes as much as other

world-making logics—oftentimes simultaneously. As such, we argue that the study of checkpoints needs to attend to the mutually constitutive co-production between circulation struggles and social groupings in the contemporary world.

This paper is based on a dedicated joint study on checkpoints in Somalia, conducted between November 2022 and July 2023. While one objective was to map the scope and distribution of checkpoints between al-Shabaab and government-allied militia, another was to understand the lived experience of navigating the ensuing fractured political terrain for ordinary Somalis. We therefore relied on a combination of participatory cartography and semi-structured interviews with over 80 Somali commercial road users, including long-distance truckers and small-scale traders as well as farmers and urban resellers, in Mogadishu, Nairobi, Garissa, Genale and Baidoa. Our joint analysis was furthermore enriched by our different previous research experiences, with one of us being from Somalia, the other having conducted extensive fieldwork in the Somali territories, and the third having researched the political economy of checkpoints across other African conflict-affected geographies.

This paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we further detail our theoretical approach, linking debates over long-distance trade and state formation, checkpoints and collective identification, and schismogenesis and authority over passage in Somali society. In the subsequent section, we trace the *longue durée* of embedding trade in kinship connections and foreground how abanship encapsulates entwined struggles over clan capital and trade rents that became productive of new clan formations. As we show, colonialism and the subsequent dictatorial regime of Siad Barre supressed but never eliminated the connection between kinship identity and trade. As soon as this regime collapsed in 1991, this connection returned with a vengeance, as each (sub)clan sought to claim transit taxes for passage through 'their' territory. It became advantageous for groups to magnify small genealogical differences to levy their own transit taxes, contributing towards intercommunal strife and political fragmentation. We go on to discuss how the rise of the Islamic Courts and al-Shabaab after it, and the foreign-backed federal government, introduced different checkpoint logics, which competed with but never replaced clan capital. We then zoom in on how abanship manifests in contemporary 'checkpoint brokerage' for well-connected clans and how, by contrast, checkpoints are deployed to marginalise and exploit minority communities in Somali clan society, before summarising our main points and their implications for further research. Ultimately, we hope that our case demonstrates the value of approaching the politics of passage as an open-ended empirical question rather than from pre-given theoretical postulates.

TRADE, KINSHIP AND CHECKPOINTS

Long-distance trade and kinship

The literature on the links between trade and state-making efforts in the contemporary world builds on a long tradition of scholarship which has sought to privilege long-distance trade as a vector of historical state formation in Africa (e.g. Alagoa, 1970; Makki, 2011; Terray, 1974). If long-distance trade certainly had a huge influence on patterns of cohabitation and conflict on the continent, it has never been dominated exclusively by kings. Indeed, there is a rich literature demonstrating the importance of kinship ties for trade networks in politically unstable or contested areas, from the linkages between informal cross-border trade and ethnic minorities in Southeast Asia (see the special issue edited by Ngo and Hung, 2019) to the role of ethnic ties in sustaining vast transnational trade circuits across West Africa (see Grimm et al., 2013; Walther, 2014). Long-range commodity chains, then, don't always rely on enforcement by impersonal administrative states; instead, they may thrive amidst, and empower, ethnic belonging, whether peacefully (Tsing, 2015) or violently (Woods, 2011). Somalia is a case in point. Despite the collapse of the state in 1991, cross-border trade and economic development have not only survived, but even flourished (Carrier and Lochery, 2013; Little, 2005). Instead of a central government, clan networks and relations underwrote thriving cattle exports and investments in impressive transnational business ventures (Hagmann, 2016). The gist of the literature has, in other words, been to show how kinship ties are key vehicles for trade. Understanding the institutions that people devise to facilitate trade is of course important given the often overbearing concentration of wealth in the trade sector in much of the developing world (Cali, 2015; Cantens and Raballand, 2017).

There has however been no attention to the obverse, i.e. how trade and competition over associated rents may also factor in the ongoing production and transformation of collective identities. It is hard to find serious scholarship today that would dispute that kinship identity is socially constructed and fluid, yet we know less of the mechanisms through which identity formation and transformation exactly occur (Donahoe et al., 2009; Schlee, 2008). We contribute to the literature by exploring how ethnic identities are also endogenous to trade struggles. Borrowing from Alex de Waal (2020), this paper is then concerned with exploring how the perpetual struggle over trade rents 'drives the formation of identities and polities, in this case, most especially, clan units'. Using a technical term, it concerns the process of social diversification that anthropologists have called schismogenesis (Kopytoff, 1987: 4; Graeber and Wengrow, 2022; Bateson, 1935). If schismogenesis denotes the process whereby collectives split up and merge into new collectives, it may involve ethnogenesis, or the hardening of new headers of collective identification, such as when members of a community practicing a certain trade—say, blacksmiths—or moving to a certain location—say the hills—become defined as a distinct ethnic community (cf. Scott, 2009; MacEachern, 2018). Long-distance trade has often functioned as a catalyst for ethnogenesis, with trading languages and habits among mixed communities along

a river or overland trade route gradually giving rise to new trading identities and ethnicities (e.g. Geloso and Rouanet, 2023; Harms, 1981).

Checkpoints and collective identity formation

Checkpoints are privileged sites to observe at the micro-level how 'macro' sociological phenomena such as clan identities, kinship affiliations and collective identities are made and remade in struggles over trade rents. In the narrow expert literature, checkpoints or roadblocks are approached as 'spatial demarcators' (Tawil-Souri, 2017), devices 'vital for establishing boundaries' (Asoni, 2023). Beyond spatial demarcation, questions of identification, othering and discrimination based on social identities are at the heart of a critical literature on checkpoints in situations of authoritarian rule, conflict and occupation (i.e. Agbiboa, 2022; Gregory, 2019; Streicher, 2020). Identity and the essentialisation of groups are a central theme in Jeganathan's (2004) work on Sri Lankan checkpoints, key to Johan Pottier's (2006) study of humanitarian access during ethnic conflict in Ituri, and Grassiani's (2015) work on 'moral othering' at Israeli checkpoints. In all these cases, checkpoints are central to the production of targeted road users as coherent groups, different from the collective subject operating the checkpoint; such differences may be used to then systematically enforce marginalisation or to warrant extortion.

The production of the collective subject operating the checkpoint, in turn, has been explored in a narrow literature on social movements (see the special issue edited by Chua and Bosworth, 2023; Della Porta, 2020). The practice of roadblocking, from this perspective, is a powerful tool in a limited 'repertoire of collective action' (Traugot, 2010: 19) that can be used to conjure collective claims. In the most concrete sense, the work it takes to physically block a road and hail road users, unites those involved into a group; what Courty calls 'the art of assembling [*régrouper*]'. The process of mounting and operating roadblocks thus always entails a kind of 'boundary work' (Gupta and Ferguson, 2008) which isn't just *representative* but *performative* of collectives and the differences between them.

To bridge the micro-level and anthropologically oriented checkpoint literature and with the macro-level sociological process of schismogenesis, it may be useful to see checkpoints as the present-day equivalent of Kopytoff's 'interstitial frontiers' (Kopytoff, 1987), i.e. the internal frontier points between communities where questions of collective identity and belonging were negotiated and remade through schism and merger (cf. Cormack, 2016). In Kopytoff's model, the productive friction of ethnic group formation was driven by resettlement along internal frontiers, which created new, distinct kinship communities yet which remained tied to the original community. What we have in mind is a parallel process, pertaining not to settlements but to claims over jurisdiction over passage—a process which equally involves the production and reproduction of internal frontiers and foregrounds questions of belonging. Even at their most benign, argued Stephen Jackson (2008), checkpoints implicitly produce internal borderlands because they manifest 'potential difference'. Checkpoints are then ideally situated meeting places at which provisional and latent identities are made

explicit in encounters to negotiate passage; in articulating a claim to passage, checkpoints thus also territorialise and re-territorialise shifting and otherwise fluid kinship differences.

Struggles over clan capital

Why would people go through the trouble to articulate so many points of 'boundary work'—what drives groups to raise new checkpoints and make competing claims to jurisdiction over passage? As Schouten et al. (2024) argue, in contexts where wealth concentrates in trade, the possibility to conjure difference is a profitable one, because borders and boundaries between communities are resources that can be converted into other forms of power, such as claims to payment for passage (cf. Hagmann 2021: 9; Feyissa and Höhne, 2010). Expanding on this insight, we advance a reading of what's at stake in roadblocking that builds on recent advances in the study of public authority beyond the state. Specifically, we expand on the idea, coined by Hoffmann et al. (2020) that customary authority in Congo amounts to a form of Bourdieuan 'capital', i.e. that 'custom' is an 'identity-based political resource … which can be exchanged for other resources, including military force, political authority and economic capital' (ibid.: 126). Without too much difficulty, it is possible to apply this Bourdieuan approach to standing in clan society, which is neatly captured by the emic term 'abanship', a unique Somali concept that denotes 'checkpoint brokerage' (Ali, 2023), i.e. the levying of a transit fee in exchange for safe passage through clan territory. Crucially, the possibility to claim this role is at once based on standing within clan society and can be converted into clan capital; and whoever can claim to represent a (sub)clan can claim some local power and the resources that come with it. Abanship is the mechanism through which clan affiliation facilitates trade, in line with the broader literature discussed above, but it operates felicitously only within a field of power in which claims to jurisdiction over movement are based on clan affiliation (or kinship).[1] It is for instance contingent on road users seeking to draw on genealogical bonds with the roadblock operator to ease passage—a social navigation strategy (cf. Vigh, 2010) that Norman (2022) has called 'kinshipping'.

Abanship thus forcefully embeds long-distance trade in tradition (*xeer*), and acts as a frontier of resistance against the potentially disruptive effects of unfettered trade: any external trade venture needs to work through the clan fabric or risks

[1] Here, a hefty footnote is in order for context. Somali society is segmentary, based on patrilineal descent. Four major clan families (Hawiye, Darod, Dir and Digil-Mirifle) and a consortium of minority clans divide into clans, which subsequently split into smaller genealogical units, including the 'subclan' and within the subclan numerous *diya* ('blood money paying') groups. Whereas early anthropologists approached the clan as a stable, fixed entity (e.g. Lewis, 1962), recent interpretations emphasise the fluidity, dynamism and contingency of the clan as a social construct (Carsten, 2020; Gaas, 2019; Norman, 2024). As Brian Hesse (2010) explains, 'Somali genealogy presents individuals with a seemingly infinite number of ways to affiliate with, or disassociate from, fellow Somalis - which may be the point'. Flexible kinship identity constitutes the fertile soil for potential schismogenesis in response to shifting opportunities and crises. This process of group fission and fusion has historically largely been driven by the entangled intricacies of conflict and pastoralism, with expanding and contracting cattle-to-people ratio acting as an engine of *diya* (blood money) groups splitting up and redefining their genealogy to reflect new collectives (c.f. Besteman, 2012; Cassanelli, 2016; Donahoe et al., 2009).

being attacked. Like customary chieftaincy in Congo (Hoffmann et al., 2020), abanship is a form of clan capital that is at once objectively useful and heavily contested, and its distribution varies wildly in function of often violent entangled struggles over clan identity and power over trade routes. Transit taxes and abanship precede the modern state in Somalia, and below we trace it back to the expansion of caravan trade in the 19th century. Crucially, we argue that ever since, control over nodes along trade routes in Somalia has been embedded in a perpetual struggle over clan capital, and that this struggle has driven schismogenesis along the trade routes, based on the possibility to conjure enough genealogical difference to warrant a separate claim to transit fees for safe passage.

THE *LONGUE DURÉE* OF EMBEDDING TRADE IN KINSHIP

Abanship: converting the caravan trade into clan capital

In 19th century Somalia, underscores Lee Casanelli (1982: 46), intensifying caravan trade constituted both a burden and opportunity for Somali's pastoralist communities: a burden because the penetration of outsiders and the circulation of prestige goods threatened to disrupt local reports of power; an opportunity because some lineages managed to manoeuvre themselves to claim control over points of passage towards outsiders—a form of 'extra-clan authority' (ibid.: 71-72) that could be converted into standing within the clan, what we call 'clan capital' (see above). In the absence of an overarching authority overseeing long-distance trade in the Somali territories, writes Cassanelli, each clan would extract protection money from caravans transiting through 'their' territory. As he put it:

> Each [clan] required some access to the major nodes and arteries of commercial exchange; each guarded its right to oversee one leg of the caravan trade as jealously as its guarded its home well and reserve grazing areas. Tribute – or protection money – exacted from caravans in transit was a source of income and prestige for the local community (Cassanelli, 1982: 156).

For instance, the Geledi sultans of the Gobroon lineage who controlled Afgoye, a point where major trade routes towards Mogadishu converge on the bend of a river, extracted handsome transit fees from all traders carrying incense and ivory to the coast (ibid.). As elsewhere, it seems that the opportunities for 'fleecing the merchants' (Abir, 1965: 5) associated to expanding long-distance trade also formed an incentive to deepen territorial demarcations among clans that had hitherto been much looser (cf. Djama, 1997: 415). Clan authority over strategic points along a busy trade route thus became a coveted resource driving processes of schismogenesis in the Somali territories, with schisms and consolidation between clans increasingly revolving around the struggle to levy transit taxes from trade. Control over a frequented trade route became a key reason for communities to move to the trade routes and try and claim 'traditional' prerogatives. For instance, as trade after the mid-19th century developed particularly in the hinterland of the

Benadir coast in southern Somalia, northern Harti lineages moved south and combatted local clans for control over strategic areas like Kismayo. Of course, such efforts didn't always succeed. An enterprising Majeerteen trader seeking to involve himself in the grain trade near Marka in southern Somalia, for instance, saw his efforts sabotaged by the sultan of Geledi, who wished to maintain control over the trade for his Gobroon lineage (Casanelli, 1982: 180-181).

Rather than devising new institutions to govern the trade, as occurred further to the south (Schouten, 2022; cf. Pawełczak, 2018), Somalis embedded the caravan trade into pre-existing clan institutions to facilitate pastoral movement. The movement of herders across clan territories was based on the convention that passage through another's territory involves negotiation of the terms of passage and the right to pasturing or water resources along the way. This institution is called *abbaannimo,* or 'abanship' (Abir, 1965), a form of clan-based patronage to facilitate safe passage. Once the caravan trade expanded in the mid-19th century, this new form of long-range displacement became embedded in abanship, to smoothen the passage along the many different clans laying claim to one or other portion of a trade route. Central to it was the figure of the *abbaan*, a protector or agent from one of the respected long lineages of a majority clan who, once contracted, granted strangers (i.e. anyone not genealogically linked) wishing to trade in the interior access by conveying the protection of his lineage in case of troubles—in exchange for a fee or cut of the value of the goods thus moved (Abir, 1965: 3).

While no physical checkpoints existed as such, abanship, wrote British explorer Richard Burton in 1894 (1894: 63), 'may be considered the earliest form of transit dues'. Levying these dues, in turn, added to the standing of brokers within their clan by disposing of goods to distribute, and also provided their lineage with some form of gatekeeping control over merchants and other strangers passing through (Samatar et al., 1988: 83-4; Casanelli, 1982: 159-160; cf. Abir, 1968: 118-9). Conscious of the benefits they could obtain from their clients, abaans attempted to hold foreign traders within their own network, preventing them from engaging with other abbaans. To use emic terms, abbaan embedded outsiders (*galti* or newcomers/guests) in the genealogical institution of his *gulti* or 'host' clan society (Casanelli ,2019: 461-462), identifying them with the lineage of their broker and affording them the same protection; a young merchant had to use the abbaan of his father, and when an abbaan died, his son would replace him (Abir, 1965: 4).

The exigencies of the abbaan system acted as a buffer against the penetration of Zanzibari merchants, meaning that caravan trade, even at its peak, remained relatively small scale in the Somali territories (Casanelli, 1982: 160). Able to source key products regionally, Somalis saw little need for intensive external trade and preferred to exchange goods in long-established clan-based exchange networks, while also preventing unfettered caravan trade from disrupting carefully crafted power balances in the interior, by keeping foreigners under a watchful eye (Casanelli, 2019: 461). The further one travelled, the more abbaans one needed to negotiate with, one for each clan unit that could lay claim to enough force to potentially disrupt a caravan. Furthermore, lineages or (sub)clans that for some

reason or other contested abanship would mount road ambushes, something the abbaan's lineage would denounce as highway banditry (Lewis, 2002: 182). As Schouten (2022: 35) describes, the relatively low requirement of levying transit taxes from caravan trade meant that if one subsection of a community wasn't sharing in the rents derived from taxing trade by abbaans, they could simply split up and start a new transit tax based on small genealogical differences. Fiercely egalitarian, Somalis may contest any exclusive claim to clan capital in their midst and seek to enlarge genealogical differences to forge a new local claim to transit taxes. The job of the abbaan was then a tough one, often involving violence to enforce smooth passage. Reliance on trade for clan capital also became a vulnerability to be exploited in local struggles: while they had previously had a deep alliance with the Geledi that made them define themselves as 'one', the Wacdaan, a bellicose clan with whom the Geledi had allied to control the trade, would block the caravan route to Mogadishu that constituted a key source of Geledi power when disagreeing with leadership decisions (Casanelli, 1982: 210).

From colonialism to the isbaaro wars

Colonial rule severely weakened abanship. Colonial administrations claimed exclusive jurisdiction over trade, establishing customs stations and control posts where they allowed Somali proxy forces called *dubat* or 'bands' to harass traders and travellers (Bruzzone, 2019). Introducing a tax regime that would outlast their colonial presence, the Italians adopted the model of the 'gatekeeper state' (Cooper, 2002), relying on indirect taxes levied on trade rather than on more cumbersome head taxes. Somalis used the distinct term *canshuur* to differentiate the new 'Christian' taxes from the more legitimate levies associated to tradition (*xeer*) or Islam (Dalleo, 1975: 209; cf. Abshir et al., 2020; Van den Boogaard and Santoro, 2022).

Roadblocks began to proliferate around 1977-1978, when Siad Barre ordered regional and district governors to requisition crops and animals from every district, leading to a countrywide network of checkpoints to finance the Ogaden War with Ethiopia (Shirwa, 1993: 4). As clan-based resistance against the regime intensified towards 1988, the military and the clan militia that Barre had armed, formed more intense rings of checkpoints around all towns, where members of clans associated to resistance movements became targets of specific harassment, as did goods travelling to areas associated to subversive clans (Africa Watch 1990: 77-79, 84, 88, 189). The number of checkpoints exploded as the Siad Barre regime progressively broke down between 1988 and 1991, quickly numbering in the thousands. In a period that is often in hindsight referred to as the '*isbaaro* wars', roadblocking became a main inflection point of the subsequent civil war. Cross-border corridors became magnets for militia—basically, every locality along a road operated a checkpoint, and every checkpoint represented a kinship-based claim to passage. The 200 km stretch of road connecting Kismayo and Dhobley, for instance, counted at least 50 checkpoints (Mohammed, 2023, 10) while there were around 100 between Mogadishu and Baidoa or Luuq and Beled Weyne (Ali, 2023: 11; Bakonyi, 2022: 131). Villages and localities away from roads, by contrast, were relatively calm and safe, because there was no money in villages and therefore less

reason to violently dispute genealogical dominance over these places (UK Border and Immigration Agency 2007, para. 2.04). The proliferation of checkpoints during this period has often been attributed to *mooryan* (bandits), young men with guns operating outside of the control of elders and traditional *xeer* or clan rules (cf. Marchal, 1997). As renowned Somali scholar Abdi Samatar put it, 'Once the state collapsed, roaming thugs mimicked the old order to demand 'tax for safe passage'. Warlords turned this into an art form' (cited in Schouten, 2023).

Dismissing these roadblockers as 'thugs', however, strongly reflects the positionality of clan elites interested in monopolising transit taxes. Usually, members of the larger clan family to which strings of checkpoints pertained could still travel past them, and militia from *other* clans which fleeced members of one's own clan would be called 'bandits' engaged in levying *baad* (meaning extortion or illegitimate taxation). Muse Sudi Yalahow, then one of Mogadishu's most powerful Agbal warlords who would go on to become Minister and Senator, can serve as an example. In a media interview in 2000, he violently dislodged what he called 'bandit' checkpoints along the road between Mogadishu and Balcad and replaced them with those of his own militia, offering travellers protection in exchange for a 'minimum fee' to 'cover logistical expenses' (IOL, 2000). The checkpoints he cleared to establish his own had been operated by local clan militia from a variety of lineages, who didn't share in the spoils that his Abgal clan militia reaped from checkpoints. It is perhaps more accurate to observe, as one informant did to Jutta Bakonyi (2022: 131) that 'every clan manned a checkpoint', and that the profitability of checkpoint rents resulted in an oversupply of claims to (sub)clan differences.

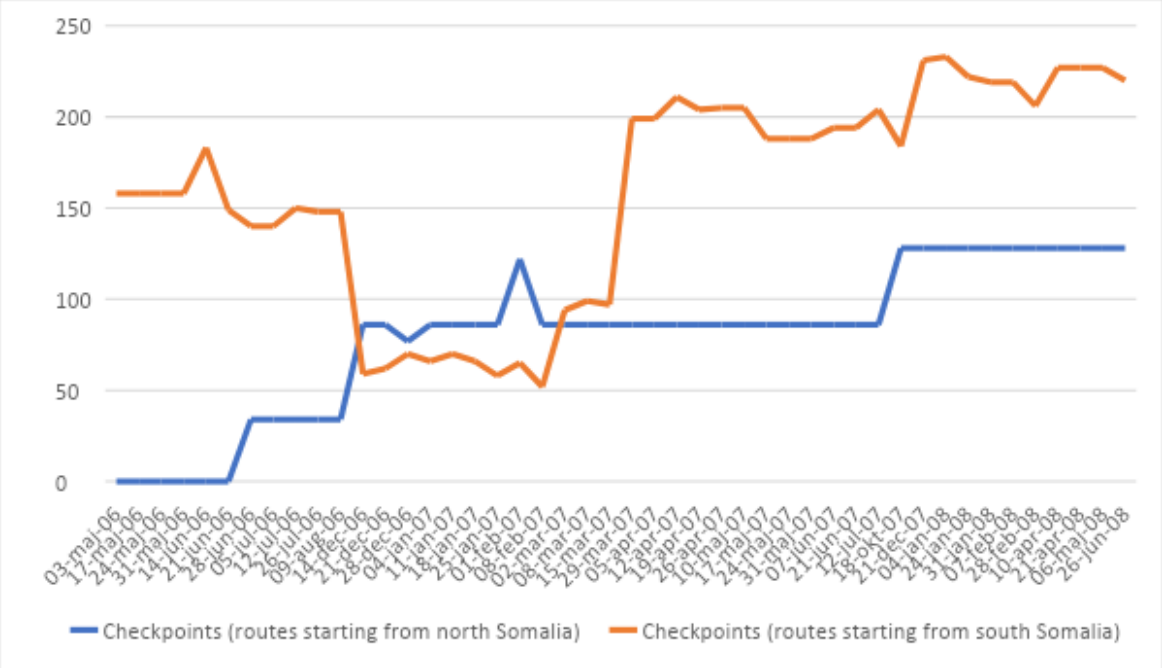
While Somalia of that period has been called a 'duty free economy' (Hagmann, 2005), no displacement, however minor, was duty free. Rather, displacement had again become subject to what Bakonyi called 'clanisation' (Bakonyi, 2014), embedded in and contingent on 'kinshipping' or manufacturing clan connections. Travels outside one's clan area without armed escorts became nearly impossible, and people became acutely aware of the confines of their (sub)clan territory as the limit of mobility. Aid and trade convoys, the beating heart of the economy, would reinforce the importance of clan identity as a logic of passage by working through it to navigate Somalia's fractured political landscape, travelling with brokers from specific (sub)clans recruited for their ability to negotiate passage along specific sections of road. The transport sector eventually became divided up along clan lines, with entrepreneurs from each clan family catering to logistics within territories associated to their clan family (cf. Elder, 2022)—a situation not dissimilar to the one that prevailed in the 19th century. Because of their dependence on local brokers, Somalis would joke that NGO's 'belonged' to the clan that offered them logistical services and protection (Casanelli, 2019: 462). As scholars have observed, these international logistics contracts have served to enhance decentralised clannism and contributed to state failure (Elder, 2022; Norman, 2023). However, when placed in the context of the *longue durée* of the politics of passage in the Somali territories, we can also see that the reason that logistics and security contracting has become the central feature of the failure of state-building in the Somali territories is because it has been co-opted into the

underlying reality of clan-based political order, rather than necessarily being its driver.

TWILIGHT CHECKPOINTS

If Somali checkpoints during the 1990s and the early 2000s are primarily associated with clan militias, they have since played a more ambivalent role as 'twilight institutions' (Lund, 2006) deployed in service of multiple competing registers of authority. In 2006 the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), a loose coalition of Islamic courts, quickly gained control over much of southern Somalia, including Mogadishu. The ICU was supported by a group of influential Mogadishu-based businessmen, who saw an opportunity to replace clan capital as the primary logic of passage with the more encompassing register of Islam. The Islamic courts rapidly weeded out the majority of clan checkpoints in southern Somalia, instead demanding a relatively low payment at a single checkpoint along each route, immensely facilitating transport across clan territories (cf. Ahmad, 2014: 95; Hansen 2007). Transport costs were reduced by half, and business boomed for the few months that the ICU ruled. This situation, however, proved to be short-lived, and the following year, the checkpoint landscape in Somalia changed once again. In March 2007, an American-backed and Ethiopia-led military intervention supported the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), bringing together several of the former leaders of clan militia who had been dislodged by the ICU. Their checkpoint predation had given rise to the ICU, and as the TFG gained terrain, these militia were able to re-establish their checkpoints under the mantle of a 'legitimate' government (see Figure 1 below). Although their number never surged back to their pre-ICU levels, there were 238 checkpoints six months after the TFG arrived and 336 checkpoints across Somalia in the following year (OCHA, 2007).

Figure 1. Number of checkpoints in Somalia between 2006 and 2008, differentiated between routes in northern and southern Somalia



Source: Data from UN Logcluster, analysis by authors and Rune Korgaard.

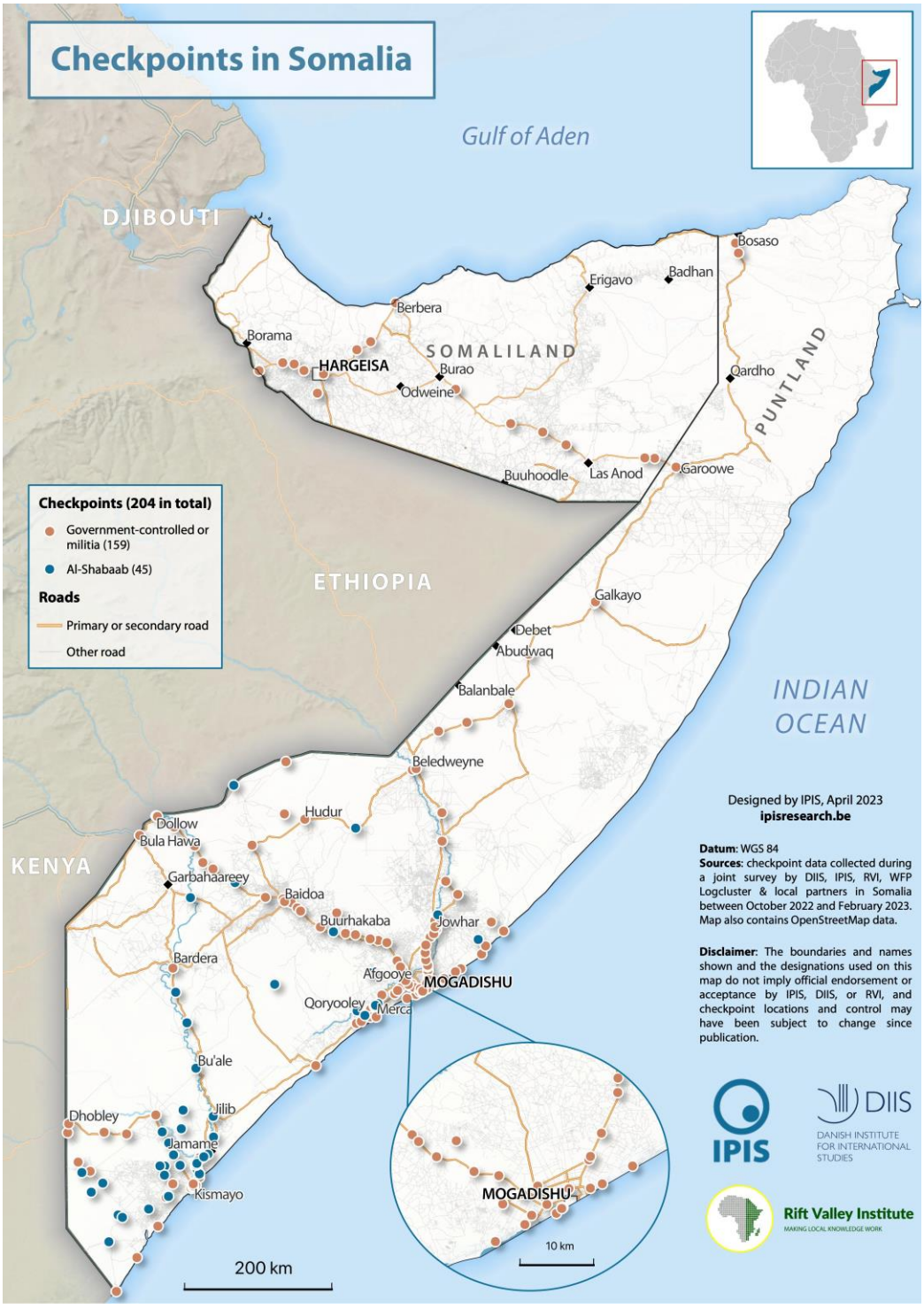
Somali traders and transporters we interviewed for this paper remembered these turbulent years with mixed feelings. Indeed, more than once, large-scale transporters we interviewed referred to the ICU period as the 'golden period', in the words of one Kismayo-based trucker, 'because there was only one checkpoint, the road was fast and safe, and we paid much less.'[2] However, it was notable that small-scale traders had more ambivalent recollections. One female fruit trader approaching the third age explained that her business was better during the times that clan militia controlled her habitual route, because she was able to draw on kinship connections to lower the transit fees. While it involved many points of haggling with armed youth, she explained that small-scale traders like her were able to draw on kinship connections to obtain transit fees lower than the heavy one-time transit taxes levied by the ICU and al-Shabaab after it.[3]

Since then, checkpoints have been infused with three competing logics of claim-making (cf. Abshir et al., 2020). Out of the ashes of the defeated ICU, and in the context of growing enmity to the foreign-supported offensive, a more radical Islamist movement emerged in 2008 in the form of al-Shabaab. While the movement initially relied on taxing businesses in urban areas, after the foreign-backed transitional federal government chased it from towns between 2011-2014, al-Shabaab became exceedingly reliant on checkpoint taxes which it modelled after ICU: a stable if hefty one-time tax per journey. Ever since, the checkpoint map of Somalia comprises a complex overlapping geography of checkpoints linked to different subnational government authorities around towns, with al-

[2] Source: interview, Kismayo, November 2022.
[3] Source: interview, Mogadishu, October 2022.

Shabaab checkpoints on the stretches of road in between them (see Figure 2). While the map may be outdated by now, it does clearly reveal that al-Shabaab checkpoints (22%) are vastly outnumbered by those of less certain affiliation, i.e., those nominally attached to one or other state-building project (78%).

Figure 2. Checkpoints in Somalia late 2022-early 2023



Source: (Schouten, 2023).

Much of this geography results from the fact that the current federal Somali state-building project is an inherently fragile political settlement that tries to negotiate and manage the many often fiercely autonomous communities and the shifting relations between them, in a counterweight against the alternative espoused by al-Shabaab (cf. De Waal, 2020). Checkpoints are key tools in this effort, devices used to bind clan militia and politico-military entrepreneurs—who may otherwise engage in freelance revenue extraction—to the Somali state-building project through the more or less stable revenues associated to operating checkpoints. Specific checkpoints are often associated to an individual political influencer or power broker who maintains personalised power networks that cross-cut formal state hierarchies and clan militia. As a result, checkpoints in government-controlled areas are often manned by a combination of local clan militia who operate the checkpoint on behalf of, or alongside, civilian agents from the local administration or uniformed Somali soldiers. The number of checkpoints in government-controlled areas, by extension, reflects administrative borders and government revenue priorities as much as the need to appease local claims to control over passage.

Along the Mogadishu-Beledweyne route, for instance, local clan militia are deployed at 19 out of the 25 checkpoints encountered.[4] Sometimes militia staff the checkpoints alone, but checkpoint revenues are almost always at least in part shared with local, district or federal member state representatives and local contingents of the Somali National Army. A certain percentage of daily checkpoint revenues will go to local militia, another to government soldiers, plus a share to the political power broker or administrative structure overseeing them (cf. Bakonyi, 2013: 283, for an example). Such revenue-sharing agreements around checkpoint revenues are relatively standardised at the level of each checkpoint but vary from checkpoint to checkpoint, as a function of the local balance of power. Checkpoints are localised enough to bind patchworks of clan claims nominally to the government project, but sufficiently decentralised and contingent upon clan power as to ensure that the government cannot exercise full control over them. In this way, checkpoints are perfect examples of 'twilight institutions' (Lund, 2006), sometimes reflecting governmental ends, sometimes clan interests—often both at the same time, at once articulating some form of government presence while working through and reifying kinship groups.

By extension, it is a recurring phenomenon that government offensives against first the ICU and today al-Shabaab rely heavily on mobilising and arming clan militias, without supplying them with a stable salary. As a result, in the wake of successful operations to dislodge a single al-Shabaab checkpoint, a flurry of *ma'awisley* (clan militias fighting al-Shabaab) checkpoints pop up along 'liberated' stretches of road, where *birqaad* (informal roadblock fees) often shoots up to levels that make the 'liberation' unpopular among road users (cf. Somali Dialogue

[4] Source: Phone interview with security expert, September 2022.

Platform, 2023). As Majid et al. report, 'traders and transporters describe the government as the 'mother of checkpoints', contrasting the proliferation of checkpoints in government territory with their relative absence in al-Shabaab areas' (Majid et al., 2023). By extension, allowing local clan militia to raise their own checkpoint revenues can have centrifugal effects, because the resulting revenues boost the local 'clan capital' of those who dispose of it and increases their bargaining position vis-à-vis other centres of power (Majid et al., 2021: 26).

This is not only the case for local dynamics, but also functions at higher political scales. For example, it is widely accepted that fiscal federalism is also clan federalism, in which major clan lineages each dominate specific federal member state administrations, a structure reproduced with nuances on the level of administrative regions and districts. This means that operators of the most important checkpoint in any given region will likely be from locally dominant clan lineages, with revenues circulating accordingly (Ingiriis, 2018; Somali Public Agenda, 2021). This is perhaps clearest in Galkayo, a city partitioned by the boundary between the federal member state Galmudug in the south and Puntland in the north, associated to the Hawiye and the Daarood clan families, respectively. Reflecting this, Galkayo has a major checkpoint on each side of the town, operated by communities associated to each of the two state administrations, both levying hefty transit taxes. As Khalif Abdhirahman puts it,

> Galkayo's checkpoints operate like private enterprises owned by the local Cumar Maxamuud (Galkayo North) and Habar Gedir (Galkayo South) clans. Even though the Puntland and Galmudug administrations formally run these checkpoints, the clans still benefit from the taxes generated there. This is because a considerable proportion of the revenue generated isn't declared to the government. It is kept by the men at the checkpoints who are normally from the same clan that erected the checkpoint. (Abdirahman, 2021: 6).

In local perception, as a perceptive UN report noted, such checkpoints are first and foremost considered *isbaaro waa qalbi*, or 'clan-defined checkpoints', where members of one clan fear crossing the checkpoint to the other side (UN, 2017: 76). In a classic example of schismogenesis, frequent incriminations by Somalis on social media impute *other* clan communities as essential *isbaaro*—checkpoint—clans. Checkpoints in one's own (clan) region, observes Bakonyi (2022: 130), are associated with 'good' security, while checkpoints in a neighbouring territory are extortionist.

By extension, struggles over the administrative prerogative to levy checkpoint taxes often reflect, or become accentuated as, clan struggles. An example of this can be found in the Gedo region, where struggles over the distribution of checkpoint taxes assumed clan lines and led to the erection of a checkpoint by a subclan excluded from checkpoint revenues. There are four checkpoints in the Gedo region controlled by the Marehaan clan family, but not without internal struggle between different subclans. In Yurkud, the Macalin Weyne subclan

started a new checkpoint to raise their own revenues, ostensibly because they were excluded from the checkpoint revenues that another Marehaan subclan (the Rer Hassan) levied in Luuq in name of the Gedo region that both inhabit. 'Until the transport association committee intervened', commented one transporter, 'trucks were piling up in the outskirts of Luuq for two weeks, refusing to pay the additional taxes'.[5]

Such issues arise frequently along Somali roads. They illustrate that while clan militia in southern Somalia today often need to associate with a federal member state or risk being absorbed by al-Shabaab, paradoxically, to the extent that checkpoints are best placed along trade routes, they contribute to the territorialisation of clan identity making claims to control of passage along certain routes (cf. Hoehne, 2016). Beyond the strategic use of clan identity to claim trade revenues, however, checkpoints are therefore not only important for clan prowess particularly when few other sources of revenue are available. As Majid and Abdirahman observe, discussing struggles over revenue between the Hiraan and Hirshabelle administrations, 'from the perspective of elements of the Hawadle elite (and perhaps more widely within the clan), control of checkpoint revenues is almost an existential issue' (Majid and Abdirahman, 2024).

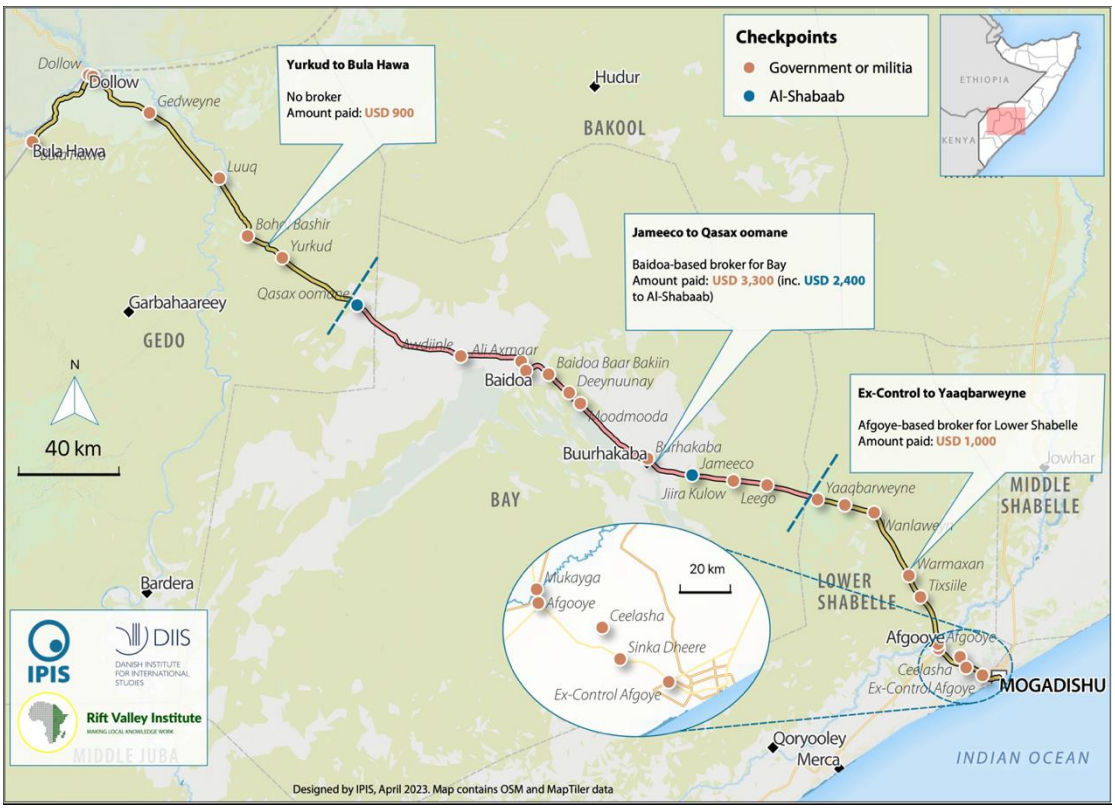
KINSHIP BARRIERS AND BROKERAGE

This section illustrates two opposing empirical dynamics that result from the fact, discussed above, that kinship is the ontological glue that holds together Somalia's checkpoint. The first concerns the brokerage of passage by relying on abanship as a form of clan capital—kinshipping in short—and the second concerns the obverse phenomenon where checkpoints are deployed to deepen political and economic marginalisation through 'othering'. Checkpoint brokerage is a key manifestation of the co-production between kinship and trade in Somalia. To reduce the friction introduced by endless negotiations at checkpoints and to increase the predictability of transit taxes, traders and transporters often rely on the moral economy of clan connections, or 'kinshipping' (Norman, 2022) to navigate checkpoints. Reinventing the historical practice of abaan, discussed above, transporters today rely on 'checkpoint brokers' (Ali, 2023), intermediaries that they pay (between USD 100-200 each) to negotiate checkpoint fees on their behalf before they take to the road. When truck drivers subsequently meet checkpoints along the road, they are asked to identify their broker, who is asked to confirm by phone and pay through a mobile money transfer, for the truck to be released.[6] To be able to negotiate and guarantee passage along armed checkpoint operators, they need to marshal substantial economic and clan capital. These brokers (called *dilaal* in Somali and *muqalas* in Arabic) rely on their standing among the (sub)clans that are found along the route and need to dispose of significant, and known,

[5] Source: Interview with transporter, Mogadishu, November 2022.
[6] Source: Interviews with transporters, Mogadishu and Baidoa, September-October 2022.

economic capital to warrant possible payment defaults among their clients (cf. Ali, 2023 and Majid et al., 2023).

Figure 3. Map of checkpoints and the 'jurisdiction' of checkpoint brokers along one Somali corridor



Source: (Ali, 2023).

In this way, the brokers mediating checkpoint passage in Lower Shebelle need to be from the Hawiye clan family and more specifically from the Habar Gedir or Abgaal clans, which operate the majority of checkpoints in this region (see Figure 3 above). However high their influence and standing among the Hawiye, checkpoint brokers from this clan family would have little leverage over checkpoint operators from another clan family. That's why transporters who move goods from Lower Shebelle to the neighbouring Bay region need to rely on a checkpoint broker from the Rahanweyn clan, who, in turn, would have little clan capital to dispose of in Gedo, where the Marehaan hold sway. Checkpoint brokerage is a widespread phenomenon and can obtain at the level of individual checkpoints. One informant explained,

> Our trucks use this one road every week, so eventually we get to know the guys at the checkpoint. So at this one Biyomaal clan checkpoint we established a connection with one of the checkpoint operators. Even when he's not there, our drivers mention his name at the checkpoint and we get waved through. We pay him directly and then it's cheaper for us and he makes some extra. In 2021 when the

> Biimaal had four checkpoints because of a conflict, he saved us a ton of money![7]

Because checkpoint brokerage relies on clan connections, this phenomenon reinforces the importance of clan affiliations in stitching together traders and checkpoint operators. However, this doesn't obtain for everyone. As Gundel observes, while members of large clan families can travel relatively widely, minority clans without significant patronage are literally stuck in place (Gundel, 2006: 15). The example of banana farmers in the fertile farming areas of the Juba and Shebelle River valleys can illustrate this. These areas are home to Bantu Somalis and agropastoralist Reewin communities not affiliated to major clan lineages that dominate the political economy of Somalia's clan federalism. They have therefore been victims of economic exploitation and political marginalisation (cf. Majid and McDowell, 2012). Over years of conflict, argue Jaspars *et al*. (2020, iii-iv), many of the minority communities inhabiting this area have been forced to flee or sell their land and resettle into IDP camps, from where they are employed in the farming areas as day labourers in large plantations of export crops exploited by dominant clans. Checkpoints play a subtle but crucial role in this process. Table 1 below provides an overview of the checkpoints along feeder routes connecting farm to market. Along each route, farm produce first meets an al-Shabaab checkpoint (these farming areas are important territories for the group) at which they get levied a one-time fee, comprised of *gadiid* for the vehicle (USD 9) and the remaining amount a *dalag* charge for the farming produce. The subsequent al-Shabaab checkpoints that a vehicle encounters are for verification purposes only.

[7] Source: Informant exchange, April 2023.

Table 1. Checkpoints along two banana supply chains

From Genale to Bakara market (Mogadishu)				From Jamaame to Kismayo		
Checkpoint	**Amount (USD)**	**Operator**		**Checkpoint**	**Operator**	**Amount (USD)**
Laabaas	24	Al-Shabaab		Jamaame	Al-Shabaab	35
Bulo Bur Buriye		Al-Shabaab		Bangeeni	Al-Shabaab	
Buulo-Yerow		Al-Shabaab		Qaamqaam	Al-Shabaab/Jubaland Authorities	2
KM50 (Lambar 50)	15	clan militia		Sanguuni	Al-Shabaab	0.3
Laantabuur (Muuri)	6	clan militia		Kobon	Al-Shabaab	
Hero-Agoon	6	SNA		Baar Sanguuni	Al-Shabaab/SNA	4
Bar Ismael/Baar Ismaaciil	2	South West State, SNA		Fargagow	Al-Shabaab/SNA	
Bodboodka	6	South West State, SNA		Singaleer	Jubaland Authorities	0.1
Lafoole	6	South West State, SNA		Far Wamo	Jubaland Authorities	0.1
Calamada (Xaawo-Cabdi)	4	Somali National Police		Bulo Gadud	Jubaland Authorities	2
Sinka Dheere/Siinka Dheer	10	SNA, Somali National Police, Banaadir Regional Administration		Bunda Mashqul	Jubaland Authorities	0.1
Weedo/Weydow	1			Yoontoy	Jubaland Authorities	0.1
Ex-Control Afgoye	10	Banaadir Regional Administration and FGS Ministry of Finance		Xaaji Weyne	Jubaland Authorities	
Kuliyada	2	Banaadir Regional Administration		Ceejlaale	Jubaland Authorities	0.5
Sinai	?	Somali National Police		Gobweyn	Jubaland Authorities	4
				Via Afmadow	Jubaland Authorities	10
Total (USD)	92					58

Source: Interviews with farmers, transporters, fruit traders (early 2023).

After passing out of the area under control of al-Shabaab, checkpoints are operated by a variety of different checkpoint operators. While the formal affiliations of the checkpoint actors in the Table 1 give some indication of the formal diversity of actors involved, all the checkpoints affiliated to different government entities are operated by distinct clan lineages. The checkpoint at Lambar (KM) 50 is operated by the Biimaal (or Biyomaal) (sub)clan of the Dir, marking the end of their territory that extends all the way to Merca, including the farming area around Jamaame. From there onward, checkpoints are operated by the Hiraab, a term for the Hawiye subclans living in Lower Shebelle, comprising most often a mix of the Abgaal and Habir Gedir (Sa'ad and Ayr) subclans with some presence of the Garre subclan of the Digil-Rahanweyn. During the wars of the early 1990s, many of these subclans fought each other for control over points at which to tax the banana supply chain (cf. Webersik, 2005), but today they have found a mutually agreeable status quo in which everyone taxes the banana trade.

As most checkpoint operators are typically from majority clans while farming is done by minority communities, checkpoint taxes on farming goods thus amount to a predatory form of wealth transfer from already marginalised populations towards politically well-connected clans (cf. Jaspars et al., 2020). This is amplified by the intensity of checkpoints and their implications for transport costs. As Table 2 below shows, the density of checkpoints is relatively higher on routes connecting farming areas to urban consumption centres. Along these routes, checkpoints appear at a rate of a checkpoint each fifth kilometre travelled, translating into a stunning average of 20 checkpoints per 100 km, compared to an average of 5 checkpoints on roads connecting major urban hubs. While checkpoint taxes for the smaller vehicles carrying farming products are lower than those charged to the large trucks used for other types of cargo, the transit taxes nonetheless weigh heavier on farming produce because of the relatively low value of farming products. As one banana farmer from Lower Shebelle put it, 'Today's banana price is $24 for 100 kg; this van can carry 2 tonnes worth $480; before we even made the sale, we paid $105 to *isbaaro* only in government-controlled area.'[8]

Table 2. Comparison of checkpoints along farm routes and inter-urban routes

	Farm routes	Inter-urban routes
Checkpoints per 100 km	20	5
Distance between checkpoints	5 km	20 km
Cost per tonne per 100 KM	46 USD	10 USD

Source: Author calculations based on (Schouten, 2023).

Because agricultural products have so low value, checkpoint taxes and transport costs more broadly constitute a significant portion of the retail price. For example, a female trader selling fruits in the Bakara market in Mogadishu explained that 'it costs us USD 20 in checkpoint taxes to transport our fruit the 30 km from Afgoye to town. On average, we pay just as much to the farmers as to these bloody checkpoint operators!'[9] Nonetheless, as a fruit trader, she is also implicated in benefitting from the marginalisation of farming communities. The checkpoint taxes she pays are indirect taxes that she deducts from the price farmers receive at the gate. This is because farming communities themselves are not able to travel to the market—and reap the associated profits—because of their lack of clan connections. As one farmer in Lower Shebelle indicated in an interview,

> To be able to pass all these checkpoints operated by the Abgaal and other Hawiye, automatically you also need to be Hawiye as driver and owner of the goods. People from the farming areas would be

[8] Source: Interview, Mogadishu, January 2023.

[9] Source: Interview, Mogadishu, December 2022.

> harassed too much at the checkpoints for not having significant connections.[10]

In other words, feeder roads are politicised spaces where kinship determines who gets to partake in the wealth that accrues from putting things in motion. In this space, checkpoints form literal 'trade barriers' blocking trade participation by marginalised communities.

Rural populations from minority clans also rely on buying food and goods sold by traders from majority clans in local markets at rates inflated by checkpoint taxes.[11] According to a local source who prefers to remain anonymous,

> It is no surprise that many small-scale farmers in my areas abandon their fields and instead go try their luck producing charcoal. While it is also taxed along the road, it has a much more stable rate of profit given that it is not vulnerable to climate variation and irrigation demands.[12]

In a context in which clan affiliation determines in part how checkpoint revenues circulate, clans which occupy major ports and corridors and ports are at a clear advantage, and the absence of functional revenue distribution mechanisms to the margins means that among those excluded, some support for the 'redistributive justice' that al-Shabaab purports to provide, will remain.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the relationship between checkpoints, authority and kinship in Somalia. Challenging the prevailing view that checkpoints equal state-like authority, we argue that in Somalia, they are deeply embedded in a system of 'abanship', where passage is negotiated through clan affiliation and the leveraging of clan capital. Drawing on historical analysis and contemporary examples, we demonstrated how checkpoints, rather than uniquely signifying state-like power, also figure centrally in schismogenesis, or the process whereby competition over resources drives the fragmentation and continual reshaping of clan identities. The makeshift and unstable nature of checkpoints—frequently popping up and

[10] Source: Interview, February 2023. A recent report confirms that checkpoints leading into the capital city 'are maintained by detachments of security forces that are members of certain clans (Hawiye/Habr Gedir and Hawiye/Abgaal). Members of marginal groups moving by car have been prevented from passing through checkpoints, even if they carry the required identity certificate' (Finnish Immigration Service, 2020: 22-23).

[11] Additionally, large-scale farmers, often having acquired concessions through land-grabbing, are typically from major clan lineages and can therefore pass the checkpoints without problem; they may absorb part of the revenues from small-scale farmers by purchasing their production at farm-level prices and selling it at profit in urban areas. Small-scale farmers wishing to remain independent from large-scale farmers must rent vehicles from professional transporters from majority clans, who thereby absorb a margin of profit. Renting a two-tonne vehicle costs USD 40; large-scale farmers often own their vehicles, thus constituting an important margin of profit. Source: interview with farmers, Mogadishu, December 2022.

[12] Source: Interview, November 2022.

disappearing—is thus not a reflection of political immaturity as measured by the ideals of permanence and fixity often associated to statehood but a healthy reflection of a vibrant political culture premised on constantly renegotiating and realigning claims to belonging and power. Because of their localised nature, checkpoints lend themselves perfectly to such a decentralised and flexible political system. Because checkpoints in Somalia give spatial expression to sometimes competing, sometimes coinciding claims of collective clan identity as much as to administrative borders, Somali nationalism, and Islamism, they are perfect examples of what Christian Lund called 'twilight institutions'.

Our findings have a number of implications for policymakers and for theories of state-building in the Somali territories. A central challenge for state-building is the *isbaaro* system's role in driving *schismogenesis*–the process of social division and differentiation within Somali clan structures. The potential for economic gain through checkpoint control incentivises the fragmentation of clans into smaller units, each vying for control over transit taxes. This dynamic undermines efforts to centralise authority and create a unified Somali state. The future of Somalia's political landscape, particularly with the anticipated increase in large-scale infrastructure and port development, is likely to see a further intensification of this clan-based fragmentation (Stepputat and Norman, 2024; Terriffe and Verhoeven, 2024). Indeed, the record shows that the influx of foreign aid and international involvement in Somalia, while intended to support state-building, has inadvertently strengthened clan-based power structures. This is because external actors, for logistical ease and security, rely on existing clan networks and inadvertently channel resources through them. However, efforts to foster economic development and trade in Somalia must also address the inequalities inherent in the *isbaaro* system. Checkpoints, we showed, reinforce existing inequalities, with minority clans and marginalised communities often bearing the brunt of exploitation and exclusion from the benefits of trade and economic activity centred on major lineages. Finally, we argue that the mechanism which we identify should also apply in other contexts in which trade is embedded in kinship relations. Somali clan identity is arguably a radical case of how kinship identity gets remade in struggles over trade rents, because the Somali clan system is highly dynamic. However, there are for instance tell-tale signs that our argument resonates in historical West Africa, where ethnic monopolies of trade routes could stoke inter-ethnic rivalries over wells, oases, trade routes and commercial entrepots, frequently involving 'trade wars, raids and reprisals which required mass support (an assertion of the sense of ethnic distinctiveness) in defence of community trading interests' (Perinbam, 1973: 419). Ultimately, we hope our approach marks a departure from studies that emphasise checkpoints as either obstacles to state formation or building blocks on the way to centralised state power. Instead, our more anthropologically inflected analysis of checkpoints hints at a far richer and more ambivalent political reality.

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