

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

PIRACY IN SOMALIA

Piracy in Somalia: Violence and Development in the Horn of Africa.

By Awet Tewelde Weldemichael.

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In *Piracy in Somalia: Violence and Development in the Horn of Africa*, Awet Tewelde Weldemichael revisits the menace of piracy off the coast of Somalia and the adjoining waters. Maritime banditry, along with terrorism, has earned the Horn of Africa the unenviable reputation as one of the most notorious regions in the continent. The critical question is how this dysfunctional state of affairs came about. Contrary to widespread assumptions, Weldemichael argues that piracy was not a product of the absence of the Somali state. Instead, it was a response to the stimulus of predatory assault on the country's land and waters by foreign profiteers. Those actors smuggled poisonous wastes inland while undermining Somalia's economic mainstay through illegal offshore fishing. By amplifying the role of external actors in the networks of transnational corruption that produced piracy on the East African coast, the author rejects the idea that Somalis are lawless people who practice criminality as a culture.

The book is written in a compelling and flowing style, and successfully deflects the range of stereotypes espoused in previous studies by contextualizing piracy in a global context. The approach is reminiscent of Reginald Coupland's *East Africa and its Invaders*, which details how international merchants, explorers, and political agents brazenly looted the region's natural and human resources in the nineteenth century.¹ Weldemichael notes that while the Western world celebrates pirates in epic literature as bold privateers, their African counterparts are pilloried as loathsome villains. 'The indiscriminate branding of Somali maritime violence as piracy is, however, symptomatic of the hegemony of the powerful to label its target — legitimately or not' (23).

In terms of methodology, organization, substance, sourcing, and theoretical musing, the book achieves both brevity and a vibrant and vigorous academic analysis of context and causation in a neat chronological manner. In the introductory chapter, Weldemichael provides a lucid history of Somalia, leading to the country's desolation under General Siad Barre in the 1980s and disintegration in the 1990s. The author notes that, as civil crisis turned Somalia into a failed state, hazardous waste from Britain, Italy, North Korea, and other places flowed unchecked into its territory. This dynamic, combined with illegal,

1 R. Coupland, *East Africa and its Invaders: From the Earliest Times to the Death of Seyyid Said in 1856* (London, 1965 [orig. pub. 1938]).

unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing precipitated the rise of piracy. In Chapters Two and Three, Weldemichael describes the local and international undercurrents that perpetuated the roguish seaborne enterprise. He frames piracy as a consequence of ecological depredation and economic depravity. Thus, the response of Somali fishermen — to become maritime vigilantes — was necessary to safeguard the state from rapacious ‘foreign plunderers’ (111). As the hunter became the hunted, what started as ‘defensive piracy’ escalated into the full-blown kidnapping and ransoming of any foreign vessel that came in sight, irrespective of its mission (3). The book sensitizes the reader to how robbery at sea created a destructive culture of lies, victimhood, desperation, double-crossing, and deaths as groups of impoverished young Somalis grew into established ‘piracy companies’ (69).

Careful examination of this book reveals that Weldemichael intends to accomplish two main goals. By underscoring the broader dynamics that transformed legitimate economic pursuits into a spectacle of corruption by the mid-2000s, the author conjures some sense of foreboding because of the way that many Somalis sympathized with and valorized the *budhcad badeed* (pirates) as patriots (86). Voracious piracy and ransom extraction spiralled out of control, ‘with claims of waste dumping further rationalizing the attackers’ acts’ (99). According to the author, the outside stimulus made life in Somalia so precarious that the pirates were undeterred by the threat of apprehension by counter-piracy navies (103).

Chapter Four details ‘the widespread deterioration of the local conditions associated with piracy’ and the Somalis’ initiative to tackle the peril (144). The econometrics of piracy ruined the fishing sector of the economy, engendered high inflation, unemployment, substance abuse, prostitution, broken marriages, and general insecurity. The author reminds the reader that not all Somalis were pirates. For instance, a pirate angrily fired upon a preacher in Eyl ‘in objection to his preaching against piracy and pirates’ (144). In Chapter Five, Weldemichael recaptures the global struggle to restore stability in the Horn of Africa, arguing that the worldwide effort to do so was motivated more by countering terrorism and geopolitical interests than by a concern to curb piracy.

Perhaps the most crucial part of the book is the conclusion: piracy off the coast of Somalia may be on its way back because of the resurgence of illegal fishing. Weldemichael warns that if the problem is overlooked, the gains made over the past decade could be in peril. More frightening is the risk of eroding the successes that Somalis have built on land in combating crimes.

Overall, *Piracy in Somalia* deserves praise for its manifest boldness in giving voice to Africans and contesting the idea that ‘the gaping absence of the Somali state did not in itself cause piracy’ (196). The book could have profited from a more nuanced argument showing that state collapse and terrorism made it impossible for the Somali state to challenge the hazard of waste dumping and IUU fishing, which ultimately allowed piracy to flourish. This minor nitpick notwithstanding, Weldemichael deserves commendation for countering the Afropessimist discourse on piracy and the Somali coast.

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