

Somali Pirates

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“The past is not only not dead, it’s not even past.”
— W. Faulkner

The second ship ever built was probably a pirate ship. When Sumerians and Harappans and Egyptians sailed to “the Land of Punt” 5,000 years ago seeking apes and ivory, gold and copper, no doubt some proto-Blackbeard on a reed raft was already dogging their wake.

In the 17th century, piracy in the Indian Ocean enjoyed a brief golden era of pre-capitalist globalist excess when freebooters such as Capt. Mission and Capt. Tew established their pirate utopias in Madagascar and preyed on Mogul as well as European shipping. Colonial New York City absorbed much of the loot, as did my rascally ancestor, Gov. Cranston of Rhode Island, who hanged a few pirates and did good business with others (including Capt. Tew), depending on what he could get away with.

When I was a 10-year-old pirate fan digging the Jersey Shore for Capt. Kidd’s treasure (another New York/Madagascar connection), I thought piracy was dead finished, a romance of the distant past. But piracy never dies. It has its classical periods, its romantic eras, and its vulgar doldrums, but it never dies.

In 1980, when I was combing the beach on Koh Samui Island (off Siam in the South China Sea), seven corpses washed up on the shore, victims of certain rotten pirates who were then preying on the Vietnamese boat people, poor refugees on leaking fishing boats and even bathtubs. These sea-going scum habitually murdered all their victims to eliminate possible witnesses. The Thai fishermen on K. Samui buried the bodies secretly, unwilling to get embroiled with “the authorities” in a hopeless case.

Thus, I learned that some pirates are merely floating muggers while others could be said to have a “social” aspect, as with Capt. Mission’s ranting and motley crew, or the virtually-anarchist buccaneers of Hispaniola.

The idea of the “radical pirate” as rebel against nascent capitalism was perhaps first mooted by British historian Christopher Hill, and then taken up by a small crew of anti-authoritarian piratologists such as Larry Law, William S. Burroughs, Marcus Rediker, Peter Linebaugh and Stephen Snelders. I also added a volume to the “social” history of piracy with my *Pirate Utopias; Moorish Corsairs & European Renegades* (Autonomedia, 1995).

Our “school” proposed that although piracy can be seen simply as primitive predatory accumulation, some pirates were nevertheless engaged in forms of resistance against the State and in the construction of egalitarian utopias on their desert islands and “floating republics.” This is certainly a possible reading of the ur-texts of pirate history such as those of novelist Daniel Defoe (who wrote as a “Capt. Johnson” in the early 18th century) and the Frenchman, Alexandre Olivier Exquemellin.

In the 21st century new world maritime order, 80 percent of the world’s goods are now shipped in huge container vessels or tankers, driven by computers and manned by tiny skeleton crews. Under such conditions, some genius was bound to realize that a new golden age of piracy is now possible, that a few determined desperados in a rubber raft can capture and hold for ransom a ship worth millions. And, in fact, such tactics are being used even now in such dangerous waters as the Straits of Malacca or off the coast of Nigeria.

The ancient Land of Punt is now part of Somalia, a “failed State” that has not had a functioning central government since 1991. According to the mass media, Somalia is a violent chaos of contending warlords, tribal coalitions, Islamist terrorists and corrupt local regimes. Curiously enough however, not all Somalis seem to be pining away for the lost days of central authority. One Somali visitor to New York City told a friend of mine, “We don’t like governments and we just don’t want one.”

Among the armed groups roaming around Somalia, no doubt the strangest are five or six companies of good old-fashioned pirates who have discovered just how easily a leaky dhow or motorboat-full of AK-47 toting ex-fishermen can hijack a huge container ship. These crews go by such names as, “The National Volunteer Coast Guard,” and “The Somali Marines.” The implications of patriotism and self-defense are not meant as irony. The pirates believe they have a social role to perform, and they have good reasons.

With the collapse of government in 1991, the unprotected Somali coast began to attract two kinds of international criminals: illegal fishing expeditions and illegal toxic waste dumping operations. Local fishermen were violently shoved aside by high-tech armed vessels from many countries; even the Italian Mafia got involved. Facing starvation from highly depleted and poisoned fisheries, the Somalis felt forced to take “law” into their own hands and resist the invaders. Then, once they discovered how easy it was, they got ambitious.

A well-informed Kenyan journalist, Mohammad Abshir Waldo, maintains that “Somali piracy” is simply a response to the international capitalist piracy of illegal fishing and dumping.¹ But while the pirates are condemned as monsters, nothing is done to protect the Somalian people from wholesale depletion of fisheries or the pollution from toxic nuclear and medical waste.

As one socialist in the European Union Parliament noted, the moral outrage is all about “protecting oil tankers. Nobody gives a damn about the people in Somalia who die like flies.” The Western media have mocked this suffering with headlines like, “They Stole Our Lobsters, say Pirates,” or simply ignore it.

According to the “pirate spokesperson” Suguli Ali, who enjoyed his 15 seconds of fame when his crew took a container ship full of tanks and other military goods last year, “We don’t consider ourselves sea bandits. We consider the bandits to be those who illegally fish and dump in our seas.” While the pirates earn about \$100 million a year in ransoms for Somalia, the poachers and dumpers make about \$300 million a year, so the battle remains uneven.

¹ “The Two Piracies in Somalia: Why the World Ignores the Other?” 1/8/09. wardheernews.com

For this reason I would argue that the Somali pirates have a distinct “social” aspect to their struggle. Unlike the murderous S. China Sea pirates, they rarely kill anyone (it’s so bad for business) and generally treat their hostages well. “We eat spaghetti with them,” said Suguli Ali. “You know, human type food!”

Although not all Somalis approve of the pirates, many do. “K’Naan,” a Somali poet and rapper, said: “Can anyone ever really be for piracy? Well, in Somalia, the answer is: it’s complicated.... the truth is, if you ask any Somali if they think getting rid of the pirates only means the continued rape of our coast by unmonitored Western vessels, and the production of a new cancerous generation, we would all fly our pirate flags high.”²

Several sources mention that many of the most beautiful young women in the country are flocking to pirate ports such as Eyl (in Puntland) hoping to marry pirates. Not only are they rich, they’re also romantic. Eyl, which was a forgotten fishing village till the 1990s, now throbs with Land Cruisers and big cars, fancy new houses, and even special restaurants for the hostages serving “foreign food.” Most pirates may be sincere about their protective role, but clearly they have no objections to enjoying their fame and booty.

Naturally, the Western press has tried to link the pirates to “Islamist terrorism” and Al-Qaeda, but this ploy backfired when Somali’s actual Islamist militia declared war on the pirates after a Saudi oil tanker was taken last year.

The Islamists are called al-Shabab, literally “the Youth,” meaning chivalrous youth. A pirate spokesperson quipped, “We are the Shebab of the sea and can’t be scared by the Shebab of the land. If anybody tries to attack us, that would be suicide.” And, so far the Islamists have not dared to attack.

After an American vessel, the Maersk Alabama, was captured this April and its captain rescued following the killing of three pirates by U.S. Navy SEAL snipers, and one wounded teenager, Abshir Boyah, “rendered” to NYC for trial, with Hillary Clinton making war-like noises offstage, it may be that the golden age of Somali piracy is about to pass into history and/or legend. But then again, maybe not.

The basic trouble remains: it’s just so darned easy to capture a modern cargo ship, so very difficult to escort and protect all the shipping that passes within 500 miles of the coast, and so impossible to “invade” the pirate enclaves. Moreover, so long as nothing is done to protect the sea itself and its fish wealth, the basic social problem just isn’t going to go away.

As I researched this article I was struck by the fact that no journalists seem to have succeeded in making real contact with the pirates in order to present the story from an insider’s point of view (what a great book it would make!); with one notable exception. The good old pinko London *Guardian* ran an interview with a real pirate,³ and I consider it such a rare and important document that it deserves to be quoted (or pirated), in lieu of any lame conclusion of my own.

² altnet.org

³ www.theguardian.com

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