

We Do Not Have Borders

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Introduction

“We Don’t Unpack”

Wherever the camel goes, that is Somalia.

—Proverb from the era of Somali independence (late 1950s and early 1960s)¹

THERE IS A POPULAR STORY IN WAJIR, a county in northern Kenya that was once part of the British colonial administrative region known as the Northern Frontier District (NFD) (see map 2.1).² It describes the arrival of the first European to the area. According to this story, the people living in Wajir were very welcoming toward their new guest. When the European visitor asked for accommodations for the night, they provided him with an animal hide on which to sleep. Much to their dismay, his hosts awoke the next morning to find that he had sliced the animal skin into a long rope, which he had used to encircle an area that he claimed as his territory.³

This evocative anecdote (which borrows tropes from oral narratives circulating in other parts of the Horn of Africa) depicts an item of hospitality transmuted overnight into a symbol of state sovereignty and land tenure.⁴ As the story suggests, the legacy of colonial boundaries is the locus of much contention among the people of northern Kenya. In the late nineteenth century, the Ethiopian, British, and Italian governments divided Northeast Africa into five different territories: British Somaliland, Italian Somaliland, French Somaliland (Djibouti), Ethiopia, and Kenya. Over the subsequent decades, the Kenyan colonial officials attempted to further confine the populations

of the NFD in an effort to impose their vision of order on the region. Fatima Jellow—a prominent resident of Wajir and wife of the NFD’s first senator—explained that when her father, a member of the Somali Degodia lineage, refused to move to the “homeland” designated for his clan, he was jailed by British colonial authorities.⁵ At various points over the last century, nomadic populations and their leaders have attempted to circumvent, redraw, or rethink the colonial borders that hindered their mobility and divided them from their kin and pasture. After World War II, Pan-Somali nationalist leaders advocated for unifying Somalis across Northeast Africa into a single nation-state. By the early 1960s, most of the nomadic inhabitants of Kenya’s borderlands (including many people who were not normally considered “Somali”) rallied around the idea of a Greater Somalia, which they hoped would dismantle the territorial borders that crisscrossed the arid north.

Alongside the largely nomadic population of the NFD, Kenya was also home to Somali-identifying people who had immigrated to the colony from coastal cities such as Berbera (in modern-day Somalia) and Aden (in modern-day Yemen) (see map 1.1).⁶ Like their nomadic kin, they shared a history of skirting colonial boundaries. Mustafa (Mohamed) Osman Hirsi, a third-generation Kenyan, described his community as a people who were “not about boundaries,” whose “umbilical cord was never cut.” His grandfather, an *askari* (soldier) in the Somaliland Camel Corps, had come to Kenya after serving in the colonial military. Like many Somali veterans, he identified as a member of the Isaaq clan.⁷ European settlers and British officials had recruited Isaaq men from cities and towns along the Gulf of Aden to serve as soldiers, porters, guides, and translators in East Africa. Under colonial rule, they had enjoyed many of the same privileges as South Asians living in Kenya, who had greater political rights and freedom of mobility than the vast majority of African subjects. Although born in Kenya, Hirsi had not lost touch with the land of his grandfather’s birth. Despite being dispersed throughout East Africa and other parts of the former British Empire, members of the Isaaq diaspora continued to maintain connections to Somaliland. Upon arriving in a new country, Hirsi explained, “we don’t unpack.”⁸

Whether describing themselves as a people “without borders” or lamenting the colonial frontiers that divided them from their kin and grazing land, many of the people I spoke to invoked the negative effects of boundaries on their lives. This pervasive theme ran across dozens of interviews I conducted with Kenyan Somalis of diverse class, geographic, and clan backgrounds in 2010 and 2011.⁹ Their shared frustration with borders provides a perfect lens through which to observe how the modern world is not, in fact, becoming increasingly “borderless” for many people.¹⁰ Their experiences also show that there are ways of imagining borderlessness that are distinct from

neoliberal rationality, which envisions people as market actors operating in a world in which capital and goods flow freely across national boundaries. As their histories indicate, narratives of transnationalism must account for both integration and disconnection, as well as reckon with ways of life and forms of belonging that predate the nation-state. Territorial borders are neither disappearing nor remaining intact; rather, they continue to be fought over, reimagined, and reconfigured.

Understanding this fraught relationship with borders is also key to addressing one of the central questions posed in this book: How did Somalis come to be thought of as only questionably indigenous to Kenya? Unlike studies that have looked at the Somali refugee community and their struggles as stateless people in Kenya, this work concentrates on a minority group whom many consider to be not fully “native” to a country where they have lived for generations.¹¹ Somali-identifying people dwelled in the area known today as Kenya long before it became a protectorate in the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, they face widespread perceptions that they do not belong within the country. For many decades, scholars blamed their predicaments on the arbitrary or artificial nature of colonial boundaries.¹² Now frequently invoked by journalists and social scientists to explain virtually any ethnic conflict on the continent, this argument has become almost cliché. While it is certainly true that imperial powers imposed borders in the late nineteenth century with little regard for the nomadic people of the Horn of Africa, the concept of arbitrary borders does little to help us understand how ethnic territorialism came to be thought of as “natural” in the first place.¹³

The idea that groups naturally belong to homelands to which they are “native” became an increasingly dominant political logic as countries the world over transitioned from colonialism to independence. Mahmood Mamdani has persuasively argued that the colonial state constructed the distinction between native and non-native, politicized indigeneness, and reinforced these divides through spatial segregation and bifurcated legal codes. This had ongoing ramifications in the postcolonial era, when the state redefined citizenship as a right of natives, rather than of non-natives and settlers.¹⁴ Yet Mamdani’s work (and much of the academic scholarship that followed in its wake) has been limited by the assumption that the colonial state imposed these categories from above and that African subjects readily internalized them.¹⁵ Instead, this book argues that older forms of cosmopolitanism, diaspora, and nomadic life came to coexist and compete with the modern territorial state.

The predicaments faced by generations of Somalis in Kenya (and their lack of a definitive status as an “indigenous” ethnic group) stand as an important challenge to the nativist, nationalist, and area studies frameworks that have long dominated the field of African studies. As Mamdani, Frederick

Cooper, and Jemima Pierre have pointed out, Africanist scholars have tended to focus on the construction of national and subnational identities at the expense of regional and extraterritorial forms of social and political affiliation.¹⁶ The tendency to approach the continent in particularist terms has obscured the ways in which Africa has been historically integrated into the wider world. Historians have also marginalized the experiences of groups who did not fit into conventional nationalist and nativist histories, including those who actively benefited from the colonial racial order, supported rival nationalist, separatist, or irredentist movements, or identified as non-African or multiracial.¹⁷ This has had the effect of reifying racialized boundaries, including the distinction between the “African” and the “Arab” worlds. For many of these reasons, historians of Kenya have, until recently, neglected the history of the Kenyan Somali population.¹⁸

Questioning methodological nationalism does not necessitate a wholesale rejection of the nation-state. Nor does recognizing the limitations of area studies entail a decentering of “Africa.”¹⁹ Such approaches do, however, call for a greater awareness of the importance of regional and global forms of solidarity in Africa, which went beyond the policed boundaries of empire and nation-state. Prior to European rule, Somali and other Cushitic speakers (as well as many people throughout the region) identified as members of Islamic, nomadic, and lineage communities that spanned Northeast Africa and Arabia.²⁰ The rich cultural and material residue left by centuries of nomadic travel, spiritual interaction, and trade enabled Somalis and other related groups in Kenya to participate in collective lives that stretched across colonial borders and to survive periods of economic downturn and ecological degradation.²¹ In addition, collective histories and narratives about a past before the advent of immigration controls, border checks, and territorial boundaries have become fertile ground and rich symbolic terrain for envisioning new futures. Kenyan Somali political thinkers have creatively rethought citizenship by engaging both with models derived from Europe and with ideas of community that evolved out of the diverse worlds of Northeast Africa and the Western Indian Ocean. Since the early colonial period, people in the region have challenged dominant definitions of indigeneness and imagined supraterritorial alternatives to the Kenyan state. In the early 1960s, many Kenyan Somalis aligned around a rival form of pan-nationalism, which undermined the hegemony and exclusivity of the Kenyan nation-state. Today, they participate in transnational networks that do not always adhere to the demographic, territorial, and secular logics of the state.

These supraterritorial, pan-national, and transnational affiliations cast doubt on the notion that ethnicity is the overriding political logic in many parts of Africa, thus challenging the ethnic paradigm that has long dominated

Kenyan scholarship.²² In the 1980s, Africanist scholars such as John Iliffe, Leroy Vail, and Terence Ranger argued that ethnic identities were neither timeless nor primordial, but rather inventions constructed by missionaries, colonial officials, and African elites.²³ In the 1990s, Kenyan historians such as John Lonsdale, Thomas Spear, and Richard Waller took the study of ethnogenesis in more nuanced directions by revealing the limits of colonial invention, the importance of precolonial institutions, and the internal moral debates around which ethnic communities constituted themselves.²⁴ More recently, East Africanists such as Laura Fair, Gabrielle Lynch, and Myles Osborne have expanded our understanding of the gendered, generational, and class-ridden processes that led to ethnic invention.²⁵ While this body of literature has greatly advanced our understanding of ethnic formation (and provided an important corrective to the racist essentialism of colonial-era ethnography), it has also occluded other kinds of political imagination.²⁶ Moreover, while ethnicity has taken on political primacy of late, it is important to avoid the teleology that sees such an outcome as inevitable.

Rather than a study of a “people,” this book analyzes Somaliness as a category and mode of thought, which has changed across time and place. At the risk of overemphasizing the importance of group belonging among Africans, such an approach provides an alternative to the scholarly focus on ethnonationalism. Examining how Kenyan Somalis imagined borderlessness from a position of marginality within the nation-state, *We Do Not Have Borders* offers new inroads into debates over African sovereignty, the “failed state,” the “resurgence” of religion, and the meanings of being African. Drawing upon archival research and oral histories, it also analyzes how Somali and northern Kenyan political thinkers developed an oppositional politics that, at times, troubled the territorial, demographic, and secular politics of the state.

“SOMALINESS” AND ITS CHANGING MEANINGS

It is impossible to write about the history of Kenyan Somali people for an international audience without first addressing the place that Somalis occupy in the Western popular imagination. In the eyes of many analysts, Northeast Africa has come to embody many of the anxieties of the post–Cold War era. Since the early 1990s, the popular press has often treated Somalia as the emblematic failed state, and the Somali people have become associated with warlordism, piracy, and terrorism. Many commentators argue that these problems are now “spilling” into Kenya. After the Kenyan government under the regime of Mwai Kibaki invaded Somalia in 2011, al-Shabaab (a militant group that the United States designated a terrorist organization in 2008) launched a number of devastating attacks on civilian targets in Kenya. While the international community has rightly condemned al-Shabaab’s

brutal acts, many journalists, security analysts, and media pundits have sensationalized them, transforming tragedy into spectacle. Often these accounts reflect a fear not of violence per se, but of violence conducted by nonstate actors who operate outside the boundaries of the nation-state and the international norms of secularism.²⁷ At the same time, these popular media narratives mask the violence committed by other actors in the ongoing war in southern Somalia.

Ultimately, concepts such as warlordism, piracy, and terrorism provide a poor lens through which to analyze such complex phenomena.²⁸ As will be explained in later chapters, these paradigms tend to abstract events from their complex regional and transnational causes and reinforce the myopic ideological viewpoints of US policy makers who have drawn dubious connections between “failed” states and global security threats. Many of the popular ideas surrounding terrorism derive from a policy mind-set that consistently advocates military intervention over diplomacy.²⁹ Moreover, such concepts buttress racist tropes and popular prejudices about Africans and Muslims. These stereotypes affect Kenyan Somalis, even though few are directly involved in al-Shabaab’s violent activities or profit from the hijacking of ships. They also serve, as Achille Mbembe argues, to define Africa in terms of “lack”—lack of order, lack of peace, and lack of governance.³⁰ In addition, according to Paul Zeleza, there is a tendency within the field of African studies to treat the continent as a whole as a “development problem.”³¹

While Somali-identifying people in the region have built forms of community that circumvent state borders and challenge conventional notions of sovereignty, they should not be understood as an inherent threat to national and international security. Scholars on the right (such as Samuel Huntington) have tended to pathologize certain groups of people who operate outside the supposedly stabilizing forces of empire and nationalism.³² Many on the left, however, have simply overlooked types of regional, continental, and global interaction that decenter the importance of Western phenomena, thus reducing what is “African” to mere “local color.”³³ Both tendencies reflect ingrained ways of thinking that can be traced to the colonial era. The colonial state, as Talal Asad suggests, played a significant role in defining who and what was “local” and “universal” and classifying those who strayed from either norm as threatening and out of place.³⁴ Many of the transnational networks that emerged in the wake of the Somali civil war, which broke out in the early 1990s, can be understood as contemporary permutations of forms of organization that have much deeper roots in the region.³⁵ Despite their criminalization, they are not unusual when considered within a longer historical perspective.

Two other dominant concepts have shaped scholarship and journalism about the Horn of Africa. Since at least the 1940s, Somali nationalists have

projected the idea that Somalis throughout the region were part of a homogeneous and ancient nation. For decades, Somalia was considered an exceptional case on a continent otherwise riddled by “tribal” attachments.³⁶ Revisionist scholars like Ali Jimale Ahmed have questioned the historicity of these narratives: “We cannot really demonstrate that all Somalis saw themselves as *one* people . . . before colonialism.”³⁷ The outbreak of the Somali civil war in the early 1990s, on the other hand, gave credence to the idea that “clan” was paramount to Somali society. This was a notion popularized by the late pioneer of Somali studies, Ioan M. Lewis.³⁸ According to standard anthropological models, Somali society consists “of six patrilineal clan-families formed by the descendants of mythical Arabic ancestors who arrived in Somali twenty-five to thirty generations ago”; and each clan-family, in turn, encompasses “a set of patrilineally related clans, subclans, sub-subclans, and lineages.”³⁹ Lidwien Kapteijns and Abdi Samatar argue that these anthropological concepts were implicated in the colonial construction of clannism, which became an influential epistemological category in the post–World War II era.⁴⁰

While seemingly dissimilar, both frameworks are part of a common discursive field. Treating “clan” and “nation” as pre-political categories that preceded the imposition of the colonial state naturalizes an ethnoterritorial paradigm.⁴¹ Clan affiliations have long been an important feature of Somali life, and many nomadic livestock-herding groups in the precolonial era organized themselves around kinship idioms. However, “clan” took on a profoundly new meaning in the twentieth century.⁴² Moreover, Somali speakers have also lived in city-states and agriculturally based confederations, as well as Islamic settlements (typically known as *jama‘a* or *zawiya*), where other forms of collective identification frequently took precedence.⁴³ “Somaliness” has also meant different things at different times, and its precolonial manifestations should not be seen as an inevitable precursor to the modern nation-state. Recent innovative research by scholars such as Abdi Kusow, for example, suggests that certain Somali clan names predated the usage of “Somali” as an overarching affiliation.⁴⁴ By the nineteenth century, many diverse populations in modern-day Yemen, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya, and Somalia had come to see themselves as Somali—an identification that was often associated with being a pastoralist, a Muslim, and identifying with a clan or lineage that could trace its descent to a common ancestor (such as the eponymous Arab patriarch Samaale).⁴⁵

This book focuses on the histories of two intertwined populations: nomadic Somali pastoralists, who have historically lived in northern Kenya on the borderlands abutting Ethiopia and Somalia; and the Somali diaspora community who came to the colony from British Somaliland, Aden, and Kismayo. (On the whole, it is less focused on the lives of more recent

refugees who fled to Kenya to escape the violence and instability in neighboring Somalia beginning in the 1980s). Their histories cut across ethnic, national, racial, and continental borders. By the late nineteenth century, Somali immigrants from Berbera, Aden, and other coastal cities were in many respects already “globalized.” This complicates conventional understandings of the Somali diaspora as being a product of the recent Somali civil war. Traveling through the circuits of informal and formal empire, Somali soldiers, seamen, traders, and porters settled in various parts of the British Empire, including Kenya. Most identified as members of the Isaaq or Harti clans.⁴⁶ Colonial officials in Kenya considered this small, privileged class to be legal immigrants to the colony and often referred to them as the “alien Somali.” At the same time, Somali nomads living hundreds of miles farther south were making their way into what is now northern Kenya. They sought to escape the expanding Ethiopian Empire, gain access to new grazing land, and seize control over the expanding caravan trade. In some cases, newcomers assimilated with local residents whom they viewed as fellow Somali kin. In other cases, Somali nomadic groups enslaved or absorbed locals into subordinate relationships, or expelled those who resisted their encroachment. When imperial powers divided these nomadic populations between different territories in the late nineteenth century, many Somalis—including those who identified as members of the Ogaden, Garre, Ajuran, and Degodia lineages—found themselves living in Kenya.⁴⁷

The term “Kenyan Somali” is commonly used to refer to these “indigenous” Somali populations. It is, however, an imperfect label. Qualifying Somalis as Kenyan (a convention rarely applied to other transnational ethnic groups in the country) has led some people to reject the moniker as discriminatory.⁴⁸ Critical theorists of US race relations have argued that dual and hyphenated identities can serve to normalize whiteness.⁴⁹ Though not an entirely analogous situation, some argue that marking Somalis as Kenyan marginalizes them from the imagined idea of the nation. Moreover, the term elides the fact that the line between an “authentic” Kenyan citizen of Somali descent and a Somali refugee or “alien” has always been blurry and contested. It is precisely this ambiguity and confusion that makes this case study so productive for examining questions of transnational belonging. In the face of long-term and successive patterns of dwelling, assimilation, conflict, and migration, the very concept of indigeneity becomes difficult to sustain.⁵⁰ While the book’s narrative arc is intended to show the long-standing roots of Somalis in the country, one of its major goals is to reveal indigeneity itself as a categorical problem.⁵¹

Transnational conditions may arise when people cross borders or when borders cross people. A useful analogy for the Somali experience in Kenya can be found in the Mexican-American borderlands. Debates in the United

States over illegal immigration and citizenship frequently obscure the fact that “Latina/o” networks, in many cases, long predated the advent of the US/Mexican frontier.⁵² Comparisons can also be drawn with the Kurdish community, many of whom feel themselves to be a nation divided between four countries.⁵³ In addition, one can draw parallels between Somali citizens of Kenya, who are often deeply connected to Somalia and who have been joined by more recent refugees, and the Jewish and African diasporas. Descendants of African slaves forcefully relocated to the Americas today interact socially and politically with members of the postcolonial African diaspora, who settled in the US and other countries more recently. Relations between both populations are sometimes fraught, but they share in a collective imaginary as “Africans.” Many Jews in the United States and Europe see Israel as a kind of secondary homeland. Like Somalis in the “diaspora,” they participate in a nationalist project from outside its borders.⁵⁴

In different ways, both Somali pastoralists and urbanites in Kenya have struggled with the implications of living lives stretched across colonial and now national boundaries. Though often treated as aberrant, the Kenyan Somali condition mirrors that of many other populations within the country and continent more broadly.⁵⁵ Like other nomadic populations, such as the Tuareg of West Africa or the Maasai of Tanzania and Kenya, Somali pastoralists were divided into different territories in the late nineteenth century by imperial powers that disregarded their patterns of mobility and transhumance.⁵⁶ The experience of Somali urbanites also has parallels with that of the Nubian (Sudanese) and Indian diasporas in East and Southern Africa. Immigrants from South Asia and Sudan, like Isaaq and Harti intermediaries, were able to take advantage of imperial opportunities in order to travel and settle in different parts of the British Empire and were often exempt from the legal restrictions governing “native” subjects.⁵⁷ A number of Kenya’s “indigenous” ethnic groups, such as the Luo, Luhya, Teso, Borana, Swahili, and Digo, to name only a few, also straddle international borders. By the same token, East Africa has experienced waves of migration over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and is now home to many “diasporas.” If such “borderless” conditions are indeed quite common, why are certain populations treated as alien and their lifestyles pathologized? Why have the Somali become the paradigmatic example of the internal stranger within Kenya (and beyond)?

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

In order to answer such questions and contribute to alternatives to methodological nationalism and nativism, *We Do Not Have Borders* charts the history of a distinctive type of oppositional politics. Examining political alternatives

put forward by Somali and Kenyan political thinkers is one means of writing a history of the present. Walter Benjamin famously stated: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”⁵⁸ Over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Somali and northern Kenyan leaders and intellectuals envisioned diverse political futures, which were not always sovereign, territorial, or secular in scope or predicated on ethnic homogeneity. Some of these “past futures” may now appear obsolete, while others may seem to be brimming with unrealized potential.⁵⁹ Analyzing alternative futures and heterodox political models is a way of upending teleologies, of avoiding a narrative that leads inexorably toward the ultimate triumph of a nation-state built around colonial territorial and institutional structures. It allows one to explore overlooked possibilities and forgotten histories of interrelation that resonate with present-day concerns. Remaining attentive to these histories often requires different practices of reading, listening, and archiving (discussed in the next section).

The first chapter of this book shows that on the eve of colonial rule, conflicts in northern Kenya sharpened the boundary between Muslim and non-Muslim and contributed to a broader reconfiguration of what it meant to be “Somali.” These notions of Somaliness were not predicated on territorial boundaries or structured by the binary racial distinction between “African” and “Arab.” Chapter 2 describes how, in the early decades of British rule, Isaaq and Harti representatives imagined themselves as both imperial citizens and members of a wider Islamic world, developing a geographic and civilizational ethos derived from both colonial and Indian Ocean thought. In the 1930s, when the colonial administration tried to erode the special privileges of the “alien” Somali and treat them functionally as “natives,” Isaaq representatives were able to mobilize through their kin in British Somaliland and the United Kingdom. They also reworked the racial vocabulary of empire by claiming to be a “race of Asiatic Origin.”⁶⁰ Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine the diverse nationalist imaginaries that emerged from these foundations after World War II. While Somali leaders frequently made claims within the dominant framework of the nation-state, their efforts also reflected the pull of extraterritorial affiliations.⁶¹ Placing archival documents into dialogue with political poetry, chapter 4 analyzes the ways in which non-secular and nonterritorial affiliations were mobilized in the service of a territorial nationalist project. Political thinkers in the Northern Frontier District (NFD) found various ways to “domesticate” the nation-state and transform an elite nationalist project into a popular movement that appealed to many of the region’s transhumant nomadic inhabitants. Finally, chapters 6 and 7 show how the defeat of the irredentist movement, the Somali civil war, and the attendant refugee crisis all sparked renewed debates over the meaning of

the past and a profound reconfiguration of the idea of a “Greater Somalia.” In the post–Cold War era, Somaliness has become more deterritorialized and less closely tied to claims on a normative, secular political order.

This book also analyzes how shifting practices of governance affected the ability of Somalis to participate in collectivities that stretched across territorial boundaries. While protectorate and colonial administrators generally sought to restrict African mobility, imperial structures were, by definition, supraterritorial. As chapters 1 and 2 show, colonial economies demanded flexibility for the movement of laborers, soldiers, traders, and capital across territorial borders. Many immigrant communities were able to form horizontal solidarities that stretched across colonial boundaries and to imagine themselves, as Thomas Metcalf notes, “not merely as colonial subjects but as imperial citizens.”⁶² In addition, nomads regularly crossed imperial frontiers and continued to see pastoralism as a viable strategy throughout much of British rule.

Nevertheless, the tensions of the imperial political economy heightened during the interwar period. Colonial and British officials came to think of Somali nomads and urbanites as a people “out of place” within the colony, who could not be confined to native reserves and who blurred the boundary between “native” and “non-native.” The question of where they “belonged,” already fraught during the early colonial era, became an ever more pressing and violent issue as Kenya transitioned to a developmentalist state (the focus of chapters 3 and 4). Developmental imperialism enabled the late colonial government to intervene much more extensively in the lives of Somali livestock traders and nomads in the 1940s and ’50s.⁶³ Alongside development initiatives, postwar political projects also posed new challenges for Somalis in Kenya. Nationalist campaigns demanded loyalty to an exclusive territorial homeland, which forced states and subjects alike to determine where Somalis in Kenya belonged and to which nation they were “native.” The rise of Pan-African nationalist movements proved problematic for a population that regularly traversed international borders and, at times, cast themselves as non-natives.⁶⁴

Partha Chatterjee has suggested that nationalist models derived from European precedents never fully “colonized” the imaginations of colonized subjects.⁶⁵ Yet the universalization of the nation-state as the paradigmatic model of the post–World War II era placed a large number of restrictions on what could be formally implemented.⁶⁶ While African leaders imagined alternatives to the imperial configuration of territory, contests over the scope and nature of self-determination led to the hardening of colonial boundaries.⁶⁷ Chapters 4 and 5 examine sovereignty as an enduring problem for colonial subjects and postcolonial citizens. When Kenya achieved independence in 1963, the newly elected government took brutal measures to

suppress the Pan-Somali campaign. By the late 1960s, Kenyan Somalis had effectively become foreigners on their own soil, their loyalty deemed suspect and their political activism delegitimized as a criminal revolt known by most Kenyans as the “Shifita War” (ca. 1963–1967).⁶⁸

Looking back at colonialism and decolonization in the wake of the recent “structural transformations” that “unmade the postwar order,” one gets a sense of vertigo, of history repeating itself.⁶⁹ From a certain vantage point, it appears that the crisis of the nation-state in Northeast Africa and the erosion of economic sovereignty that attended neoliberal restructuring led to a certain “rebirth” of decentralized networks that flourished prior to World War II. When Somalia became increasingly unstable in the late 1980s, people began to seek refuge in cities as dispersed as Nairobi, Dubai, Minneapolis, and London, creating a new, globalized Somali diaspora. Many drew on long-standing kinship ties with people in neighboring Kenya in an effort to avoid overcrowded and underfunded refugee camps. Chapters 6 and 7 examine how Nairobi developed into a site of asylum and a global hub for Somali business. Islamic and refugee networks also provided important economic and social alternatives for those pushed to the margins of the Kenyan political system.⁷⁰

The arguments in this book are influenced by this recent turn of events and by a broader transnational turn that has reached across various disciplines. The rise of transnational studies (and the accompanying skepticism toward the nation-state) has taken the discipline of history in novel directions. Nevertheless, new paradigms can reproduce old mythologies.⁷¹ Recent scholarly developments risk perpetuating older modernization theories and obscuring the highly unequal and unevenly connected nature of the “global” world.⁷² The reemergence of deterritorialized networks in East and Northeast Africa thus should not be seen as simply the latest “stage” within the familiar, progressive narrative of postmodernity—a local analogue to multinational corporations, cosmopolitan elites, and global religious revivals.⁷³ Nor should these trends be interpreted as sounding the death knell for national sovereignty or citizenship.⁷⁴ In fact, the predicaments faced by nomads on the Kenyan/Somali borderlands, members of historic Somali diasporas, and refugees reveal just how much power state borders and notions of citizenship still have.⁷⁵ As chapters 6 and 7 show, while Kenyan Somalis have largely turned away from the idea of unifying under a Greater Somali nation-state, many are also trying to fight disenfranchisement and have their minority status fully recognized within the country.

Far from being parochial, the difficulties faced by Kenyan Somalis refract problems of global relevance. Debates over indigeneity have symbolically reordered the world, creating groups of people who do not “fit” into the nation-state. As Liisa Malkki has argued, minorities who do not fall neatly

into received categories often become the targets of those who seek to naturalize and maintain established boundaries and classifications.⁷⁶ Whereas expatriates, aid workers, and international businessmen in Kenya (and across the Global South more broadly) tend to be thought of as worldly and cosmopolitan; nomads, immigrants, and refugees are often identified as “displaced, uprooted, [or] disoriented.”⁷⁷

Kenyan Somalis have been struggling for decades to find ways to be both “Kenyan” and “Somali” (or, in some cases, “Somalilanders” or “Ethiopians”)—a goal that has been complicated by the Somali refugee crisis and the global “war on terror.” To this day, traders, migrants, and nomads in Kenya cannot freely or easily participate in networks that stretch across territorial boundaries without furthering perceptions that they are alien to the country. Even those who are highly localist in their orientation, speak multiple Kenyan languages, and are considered to be culturally assimilated into Kenya are sometimes perceived as foreign. As Hussein Mohamed Haji complained, “I am 70. I was born in Kenya. I speak six Kenyan languages. But when other Kenyans see me they just make the assumption that I’m a Somali.”⁷⁸ Kenyan Somalis have become the locus of anxious discussions over who is an “authentic” Kenyan citizen, who has rights to the city and a share in the “national cake,” and what is the “proper” place of religion in political life.⁷⁹

Contemporary efforts by activists, scholars, and theorists to envision a future politics less tethered to existing nation-state boundaries were, in many ways, anticipated by Somali and northern Kenyan political thinkers. For decades, Kenyan Somalis have looked beyond the horizons of the territorial state and toward alternative kinds of imagined communities (even though such strategies sometimes put them at odds with state authorities and made them vulnerable to political marginalization). As I argue most explicitly in the conclusion, it is possible to grasp the critical resonance between Somali tactics and the current conditions of those most affected by contemporary globalization, while guarding against simplistic revivals of the past. These transnational practices (and the political innovations that preceded and followed the universalization of the nation-state) can offer inspiration for future arrangements within the region and beyond.

METHODOLOGY

In many ways, studying Kenyan Somali networks both conforms to and requires certain departures from trends in African studies. In recent years, historians and anthropologists have begun to question the traditional focus of academic fieldwork: namely, the “local” ethnic group. Many scholars have abandoned this method in favor of multisited research projects.⁸⁰ At first glance, a study of Somalis living in Kenya may seem an example of the

older model of “local” fieldwork. Yet my interviews, though largely (but not exclusively) confined to people who identified as both Kenyan and Somali, did not give rise to a picture of a bounded, local community situated within a delimited culture or territorial homeland. Rather, they revealed how individuals defined what it meant to be Somali in different ways and in dialogue and coordination with people living throughout the region—and, in some cases, across the globe.

Perhaps the greatest value of oral history is how it provides insights into forms of interpersonal connection that lie outside the state/subject and state/citizen relationship. Relying on state archives alone can reinforce what Nancy Rose Hunt refers to as the cliché of the colonial encounter—the tendency to reduce historical agency to an “epic-like meeting” between “colonizers and colonized.”⁸¹ Speaking to Kenyan citizens who identified as Somali revealed that loyalties and connections that took place outside the state’s bureaucratic surveillance—connections to people in Somaliland, the wider diaspora, and the broader Muslim community—were of no less significance. It also brought to the fore dynamics that are otherwise occluded by state archives’ reliance on the epistemologies of clan and ethnic belonging. It showed, for example, that many non-Somalis, including members of the Borana, Rendille, and Sakuye populations, had at times participated in the construction and development of Somaliness.

It is hard to disentangle the networks through which I traveled as a researcher—which were shaped by the forms of power inherent in my passport, my race, my institutional affiliations, and my comparative affluence—from the networks I was trying to study. These were shaped by some actors who were comparatively powerful, but many of whom were relatively powerless. I began my fieldwork in Nairobi, where I interviewed elders who could recall the late colonial and early postcolonial periods and met younger community leaders who put me in touch with many of my key interlocutors in other parts of the country. These social connections facilitated my movement across different regions. The checkpoints and miles of untarmacked road that I crossed moving between Nairobi and Northern Kenya were stark reminders of both my own privileged freedom of movement and the everyday barriers to mobility that many Somalis and northern Kenyans face. The very global structures of power that enabled me to move to Kenya to conduct research often inhibited the mobility of my Somali interlocutors and friends. Thus, my fieldwork became a means of meditating upon differential mobility and the policing of different transnational practices.

To conduct interviews, I traveled to various towns, including Nakuru, Isiolo, Naivasha, and Garissa. I also occasionally spoke with Kenyans who originated from other areas such as Mandera, Moyale, and Marsabit. However, most of my fieldwork was concentrated in two main sites. One was

Nairobi—Kenya’s bustling, cosmopolitan capital and the country’s largest city. The other was Wajir—a very marginalized (but in certain respects, no less cosmopolitan) rural area and one of the three districts (now counties) in the North Eastern Province (NEP), which had once been part of the Northern Frontier District (NFD). Examining Wajir and Nairobi together revealed the importance of multidirectional links between the countryside (often assumed to be the site of “traditional,” “authentic” Africa) and the putatively modern city. It enabled me to see the ways in which people from different geographic, clan, occupational, and class backgrounds reproduced and redefined what it meant to be Somali. Individuals and groups constituted themselves through “the continuous creation of the past.”⁸² By accumulating archives, sharing personal memorabilia, and drawing upon collective representations of the past, people were able to publicly define themselves as “the” Somali, “the” Isaaq, or as “Africans,” “Arabs,” and so on. The past weighed heavily on current generations, serving as both a resource for imagining new futures and a threatening reminder of dissident, outdated, or embarrassing subjectivities.

Moreover, carrying out interviews in different locations allowed me to let go of ideas that people naturally belong to specific “lands,” that fieldwork gives a scholar privileged access to “local knowledge,” or that one can simply enter or exit a defined “zone” of culture.⁸³ Moving to such diverse sites was challenging (each time I traveled to a new area, I had to gain people’s trust anew and get accustomed to new cultural and linguistic norms). However, this productive disorientation also led to a heightened awareness of the missteps, misunderstandings, and negotiated power dynamics that color any research encounter.⁸⁴

Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that “lived inequalities yield uneven historical power.”⁸⁵ One way this manifested itself was in the gendered nature of my interviews, which were skewed toward men. Despite my best efforts, I had a difficult time speaking to women. Unless they were recognized community leaders, older women often directed me to elder men, who were widely seen to be the bearers of public history. Men also tended to have more experience with the performative aspects of history telling and more familiarity with the narrative expectations of being interviewed by a white foreigner. When I did speak to women, they sometimes told me stories that foregrounded the accomplishments of their male predecessors, thus reinforcing the widespread notion that it is men that make history. To some extent, such responses stemmed from the limitations of my own methodology and approach. Over time, I became much better at approaching women and asking questions that motivated them to talk about their experiences and understandings of the past. However, no feminist methodology can fully overcome the power imbalances that shape the interview encounter or the

patriarchal dynamics that influence how women relate to narrative history (problems that are hardly exclusive to Africa or the Islamic world).⁸⁶ In order to reconstruct the lives and experiences of women, I often had to turn to texts written by Europeans or oral testimony by men, which I have analyzed with attention toward traces of female authorship.

While oral testimony plays an important role in my analysis, this book also draws upon extensive archival research at the British National Archives and the Kenya National Archives. The bulk of my source material came from a range of low- to high-ranking bureaucrats in the East Africa Protectorate and, later, the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya. I also relied upon records from officials in neighboring territories, such as the Protectorate of British Somaliland, and administrators in the Colonial, Foreign, and Home Offices in the United Kingdom. Africans wrought their influence on these archives in various ways, whether by writing letters and petitions directly to government officials or by affecting the knowledge and understanding of British administrators. Archival documents (and the scholarly work that draws upon them) also made their way into people's hands, shaping oral testimony. Thinking about distinct oral and written domains or distinct "African" and "European" spheres of knowledge (a dichotomy that becomes even less relevant for the postcolonial archive) obscures their mutual imbrication.⁸⁷ Treating sources (both oral and written) as situated performances (with different rules of inclusion and exclusion, privileged informants, and stylistic and rhetorical strategies) proved more analytically meaningful.⁸⁸

Dispensing with the notion that there exists an authentic, objective, or unmediated voice, I instead focused on amassing a diversity of narratives.⁸⁹ Woven throughout this text are multiple archives comprising colonial documents, transcribed oral histories, poetry, memoirs, and other sources. For more recent decades (when government archival records were either closed or less substantial), I relied more heavily on newspaper articles and human rights and NGO reports. Using such varied materials brought important methodological and political questions to the fore. How do people invoke the past in everyday life to comment upon and intervene in the present? Whose narratives do you privilege when writing a scholarly historical account? How does one read sources for hidden silences and elisions? In what ways did my race, comparative privilege, and disciplinary training shape the production of knowledge? Each chapter grapples with these questions and others. The structure of this book thus follows a traditional narrative and builds up an argument about epistemology.

Many of the chapters serve as mediations on the limits of historicism. Chapter 4, for instance, draws upon oral poetry, showing that Pan-Somali nationalism was not merely an elite project, but rather one shaped by and oriented toward rank-and-file nomadic people. Such sources resist easy

historicism, as it is sometimes difficult to determine their exact date of production and authorship. They thus challenge certain scholarly conventions, including the commitment to liberal agency and historical time. However, these poems and songs also provide very important insight into idioms, metaphors, and discursive practices that cannot be easily grasped through the archives alone. Communities record and transmit the past in ways that may unsettle scholarly epistemologies, which require that historians consider the disciplinary limitations under which they operate.⁹⁰ A number of chapters also examine the problems of politically irresponsible historicism. Acknowledging the dangers in authorizing a singular version of the past, this book points to different methods of analyzing politically sensitive topics (including through reference to divine intervention).

One of the greatest difficulties I encountered was carrying out research in a highly charged and politicized setting. Oral history is often endorsed as a means of democratizing history and giving “ordinary” people a voice.⁹¹ Yet various Kenyan and Somali political thinkers have used history to incite ethnonationalist and religious divisions, which in turn shaped the way ordinary people came to view their neighbors. Some Kenyan citizens regarded Somalis with suspicion and resented their presence in the country. By the same token, some Somalis had internalized derogatory views of other Kenyan ethnic groups and perpetuated the chauvinistic idea that they were not fully “African.” It is important, however, to recognize that such sentiments were far from universal. Since the start of the Somali civil war, Kenya has taken in hundreds of thousands of refugees—far more than any Western nation. While the country is not immune from anti-immigrant sentiments that plague nations throughout the world, it has also served as a refuge for people across the region and has often succeeded in accommodating very diverse ways of life.

Understanding these complex dynamics requires deconstructing the Manichaeic division between colonizer and colonized. As Eve Troutt Powell reminds us, scholars must remain attentive to colonial forms of othering, while at the same time recognizing that colonized African subjects were also capable of excluding fellow Africans, reinforcing hierarchical forms of domination, and perpetuating colonial modes of racialization. African states like Egypt and Ethiopia have engaged in practices that have led some to label them as internal colonizers.⁹² Members of the Somali community have, at times, harbored racist views toward other East Africans, promoted the idea that they themselves were not “African,” and expressed religious chauvinism against Christians or other “inferior” Muslims. In the case of Kenya, however, discriminatory thinking has not always mapped onto political power. While some Somalis hold derogatory views of “Africans,” they also face marginalization and are often subjected to discriminatory treatment by

the Kenyan state. By showing the ways in which prejudiced thinking intersects with structures of power, this book reveals the sometimes-blurry line between victim and victimizer, while remaining attuned to important distinctions between institutionalized racism and bigotry.⁹³

Conducting oral history was also challenging because the past was a highly emotive topic for many people. After independence in 1963, Somalis endured significant trauma at the hands of Kenyan officials, who often acted with the tacit and sometimes explicit support of the British and the US governments. Many were eager to speak to me about these painful memories of state violence and repression. Though some were suspicious of my intentions or simply unwilling to revive such painful memories, others saw me as a potential mouthpiece for highlighting their stories of suffering and marginalization, or an advocate who could connect their stories to an international human rights agenda. Rather than simply “compiling a record of horror, a kind of case for the prosecution,” however, this book tries to uncover the logic that facilitated violence and made the relationship between Somalis and the Kenyan state so fraught and complicated.⁹⁴ It focuses not simply on the ways in which people imagined community, but also on moments and gestures of antimembership, rejection, and refusal. This study traces the reasons why Somalis have come to hold such an enigmatic, liminal status within Kenya, where they are often regarded as both locals and foreigners, citizens and strangers.