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Islam & Ethnicity in Northern Kenya & Southern Ethiopia



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GÜNTHER SCHLEE
with
ABDULLAHI A. SHONGOLO

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Contents

<i>List of Maps, Figures and Tables</i>	vii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	ix
Introduction	1
1 <i>Pax Borana</i>	19
2 Non-Proto-Rendille-Somali Elements of Modern Ethnic Groups	39
3 Modern Trends	71
4 Ecology and Politics	111
5 The Impact of War on Ethnic and Religious Identification in Southern Ethiopia in the Early 1990s (with ABDULLAHI A. SHONGOLO)	159
<i>References</i>	171
<i>Index</i>	179

List of Maps, Figures and Tables

Maps

Map 0.1	Boundaries in colonial Kenya	8
Map 4.1	Movement of a camel <i>fora</i> based on Kiliwe Hirre (KH) March 1989–March 1990	150
Map 4.2	Cattle camp movement from Kiliwe Hirre (KH) March 1989–March 1990	152
Map 4.3	Stock routes	155

Figures

Figure 0.1	Colonial movement permit	6
Figures 1.1–1.5	Moieties and major divisions of ethnic groups mentioned in the text	20
Figure 2.1	Heptagram illustrating the days of the Gods	45
Figure 3.1	Dabel from a nearby elevation	74
Figure 3.2	Sakuye elder in a nomadic hamlet	74
Figure 3.3	Somali hut under construction	75
Figure 3.4	Somali hut frame covered with mats	75
Figure 3.5	Migrating nomadic hamlet in Mandera District	77
Figure 3.6	At the well	77
Figure 3.7	Hussein, a Sakuye Chief, intent on tracking a lion	78
Figure 3.8	Sakuye Chief ensures all is going smoothly at the well	79
Figure 3.9	The anthropologist's camp in the village of Dabel	80
Figure 3.10	The anthropologist's tent	80
Figure 3.11	Chief's third wife	82
Figure 3.12	<i>Freie Deutsche Jugend</i> shirt worn by a Sakuye	82
Figure 3.13	Ali Jarso and the ethnographer	83
Figure 3.14	Constructing an instrument in lieu of a scalpel	85

Figure 3.15	Woman experienced in blood-letting	85
Figure 3.16	Blood-letting the author	86
Figure 3.17	After blood-letting the author	86
Figure 3.18	Somali traders and their Rendille customers, Ngoronit, Kenya	106
Figure 4.1	Water is drawn from a natural cistern at Lensayu	124
Figure 4.2	The water is poured onto the rock	124
Figure 4.3	The water flows down to where it is collected	125
Figure 4.4	The water is loaded on camelback in wooden containers	125
Figure 4.5	Reer Abdi Adan, smallstock hamlet	128
Figure 4.6	Agnatic relationships between the household heads of Reer Abdi Adan, smallstock hamlet	128
Figure 4.7	Agnatic relationships between husbands and wives (No. 1, No. 5)	129
Figure 4.8	Household 10, relationship between the spouses	129
Figure 4.9	Genealogical relationships between spouses	130
Figure 4.10	Reer Abdi Adan, camel hamlet	130
Figure 4.11	Agnatic relationship between the married men in the camel hamlet	131
Figure 4.12	Relationships between spouses (1)	131
Figure 4.13	Relationships between spouses (2)	132
Figure 4.14	Relationships between spouses (3)	132

Tables

Table 2.1	Seven celestial bodies and their periodic movements in relation to the Earth	45
Table 2.2	Gabra forms of the names of days of the week and the respective names for boys and girls born on each day	47
Table 2.3	Gabra set of names of days of the week and their associations	48
Table 2.4	Comparison of words in Maa and Rendille	57
Table 2.5	Examples of Arabic loanwords in Rendille	61
Table 2.6	Comparative chart of names of months in six languages	64

List of Abbreviations

Amh.	Amharic (Language)
Ar.	Arabic (Language)
B	Boran (Language)
CDF	Constituency Development Fund
DC	District Commissioner
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
FFZDDD	Father's father's sister's daughter's daughter's daughter
KANU	Kenya African National Union
KNA	Kenya National Archives
Ksh	Kenya Shilling
MoBr, MB	Mother's brother
NFD	Northern Frontier District
OALF	Oromo Abo Liberation Front
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
OPDO	Oromo People's Democratic Organization
PC	Provincial Commissioner
PRS	Proto-Rendille-Somali
R	Rendille (Language)
S	Somali (Language)
SALF	Somali Abo Liberation Front
Sw.	Swahili (Language)
TPLF	Tigrayan People's Liberation Front
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Introduction

Between two East African Highlands, the Ethiopian plateau to the north and Mt. Kenya to the south, there is a vast arid and semi-arid lowland, which, to the east, stretches into Somalia and down to the coast of the Indian Ocean. It comprises the larger part of Kenya and a substantial part of Ethiopia along its southern fringes. Most of this land is used by nomadic pastoralists, and only pockets of it are suitable for cattle. The rest is pasture for camels, sheep and goats.

Without wishing to revise political maps (there are many good reasons against such revisions) one can say that in many ways these lowlands belong to the Horn of Africa or North-East Africa rather than East Africa. Linguistically, Cushitic languages dominate the entire area from the eastern shore of Lake Turkana (formerly Lake Rudolph) down to the Ocean. The largest of them is the Oromo language, which is also the language with the widest distribution in neighbouring Ethiopia. Here it is represented mainly by the Boran dialect. To the same Lowland East Cushitic sub-branch of that language family belong various Somali dialects spoken in the region, as well as Rendille, a language which might be very similar to what the Somali language once was before the Somali became Muslims and their language incorporated a vast number of Arabic loanwords.

Economically, the lowlands of northern Kenya also form one region with the adjacent areas of Ethiopia and Somalia. There are the same groups of nomads and agro-pastoralists on both sides of the international boundaries, and animals are driven across them depending on where the highly erratic rainfalls have fallen. There is a fateful correlation between the amount of rainfall and its distribution in time and space: the lower the amount, the less predictable whether it will rain in a given year and where – and the average rainfall in northern Kenya is rather low. Much of the territory is enclosed by the 200 mm isohyet. There may be torrential rains on one day in one spot and years of drought in the immediate vicinity. Evaporation is that of an equatorial lowland.¹ Apart from rainfalls, it is fluctuations in price levels which determine the movements of livestock. Before the collapse of statehood in Somalia, sheep were exported from Kenya into Somalia for Islamic festivals like *'Id ul Fitr* and *'Id ul Hajj*; especially for the latter vast numbers of sheep were taken from Somalia to Mecca, where millions of pilgrims from all over the world are obliged to sacrifice a sheep (Schlee 1992a). Now, as the roads to the Somali ports are obstructed by greedy warlords, animals find their way into Kenya to be exported via Mombasa (Little 1996). The catchment of the Nairobi market

¹ For detailed maps about rainfall patterns and their implications see those which come with the *Range Management Handbook of Kenya* (Shaabani, Walsh, Herlocker and Walther 1992a,b,c,d). They include maps on meaningful measures of production risks like 'reliability of rainfall' and 'maximum numbers of consecutive months without relevant rainfall during the last 30 years'.

for cattle often extends far into Ethiopia. At times, there are also flows northwards. In a quite recent development (2008), Rendille camels from 300 km south of the Ethiopian border found their way to the border town Moyale and on to Saudi Arabia for slaughter. Most of this cross-border trade is neither taxed nor does it find its way into any statistics.

Although this book mainly deals with Islam and ethnicity, two modes of collective identification, it contains a chapter which has a focus on ecology and even two district-level perspectives on livestock management and livestock trade (Chapter 4). The identity politics in which people engage, the social links which they maintain or cut, cannot be divorced from the types of mobility and exchange their livelihood demands. Precarious ecological or economic conditions in given areas and/or opportunities elsewhere may motivate people to maintain or create cross-cutting ties to other peoples or areas. There are also, of course, forces acting in the opposite direction. If territorialized ethnicities and exclusive identities are rewarded by politics, they tend to gain importance at the expense of wider connections and cross-cutting ties.

Apart from linguistics and economics, a third field in which northern Kenya can be said to belong to the Horn of Africa is that of tribal politics. There have been movements of ethnic expansion across the boundaries of the modern nation states long before they came into existence. The Oromo expansion of the sixteenth century is the most important of these.² There have also been Somali immigrations which added new elements to the Somali groups present in Kenya since time immemorial.³ The following chapter, on *pax borana*, will cover a part of this history. Further down, in Chapter 5 and in our companion volume (Schlee & Shongolo 2012), we shall see that ethnic politics in northern Kenya is still interwoven with conflicts going on in Ethiopia and Somalia. The ethnicization of politics in the core areas of Kenya – the Rift Valley and Central Province – is however not less important as a factor shaping the fates of people in these northern lowlands.

A HISTORICAL SUMMARY

Northern Kenya was incorporated by the British colonial power into Kenya as a buffer zone against rival expansionists, the Ethiopia of Menelik II and the Italians who managed to colonize Eritrea and Southern Somalia and were continuously pushing and pulling for a larger and contiguous East African empire. Finally the Italians managed to subject Ethiopia for a short while, from 1936 until 1941, when the British and their South African allies ended their rule and reinstalled Haile Selassie. Northern Kenya kept rival powers at a distance from those parts of Kenya which the British regarded as an asset: the White Highlands – the high, temperate, fertile lands reserved for white settlement. There was a fresh influx of aspirant white farmers in the course of demobilization after World War I, so new areas needed to be vacated by the Africans, including those who had fought alongside the British against the Germans in Tanganyika. Another asset which required protection was the Uganda Railway. The north itself was a liability rather than an asset.

²Hassen (1994); Merid Wolde Aregay (1971); Schlee (1989a).

³That there may have been people speaking Somali dialects in Kenya for a very long time does not imply that they referred to themselves as Somali or that they were part of a Somali nation in the modern sense. In fact, as we shall see (Chapter 1) the ‘Somali’ identification has in some cases evolved, and not always in a straight line, only since the early twentieth century.

The British aimed at minimizing the cost for keeping it under their administration: administration was kept at a lowest possible level of personnel. One wonders how the British with one or two of them per district and a couple of Somali or Indian clerks managed to maintain an administration which by those old enough to remember is often favourably compared to that of independent Kenya. Their secret lies in moving around a lot. A District Commissioner was expected to be travelling most of his time, and travel they did and, in the early decades of British rule, mostly on foot. They spent much time listening to people in remote localities and gave them a feeling of participation, even though what they materially did for them was very little. Formal education and health care were practically absent. In Moyale, for example, there was just one primary school which served both Moyale and Wajir districts (now there are 25, plus three secondary schools, in Moyale District alone) and there was a Hospital to which patients came from as far as did the primary school pupils. These practices of minimal interference were in harmony with some romantic ideas about the preservation of contemporary cultures and their capacity for self-regulation – ideas derived from the structural-functionalist persuasions of those days that cultures are equilibrated systems whose balance should not be disturbed beyond the capacity of the system to compensate influences and to re-establish its balance where necessary. The administration struggled to make the districts pay for the cost of their own administration. That was practically all. But there were obstacles on the way to even this modest aim. If poll tax was introduced or raised too high in a border area, entire segments of the population might move across into Ethiopia, like the Garre did repeatedly.⁴ But to some people at some times in the early colonial period the taxation burden appeared higher in Ethiopia: a group of Boran who came to be known as Hofte moved the other way, into Kenya.⁵ Tax had to be paid from some monetary income. People were expected to sell animals. But there were also the white settlers who now owned ranches on former Maasai pasturelands and who made sure that their livestock economy was protected against competition from the nomads in the north by a quarantine belt, a special marketing channel for Africans, and a grading system for beef. Some of these structures have survived independence and now protect the African political elite whose members have taken over the ranches, against competition by the grandsons of the nomads of those days.⁶ In all these aspects the northern lowlands were tied to Kenya, for better or worse.

After introducing spatial classifications by discussing in which way these lowlands fit into North-East Africa and in which way they belong to East Africa, let us now try to introduce some classifications of time by dividing the history of the area into periods. Historical periods are always fuzzy because they overlap, and they are always arbitrary because one might as well apply alternative criteria which lead to different periodization. Their only use is rough guidance, a quick and preliminary orientation. But as an introduction is expected to provide just that, this might be the appropriate place to define such periods.

Colonialism is an important phase in African chronologies. It is usual to divide history in the pre-colonial, the colonial and the post-colonial phase. In analogy to the *pax imperica*, the (internal) peace of the Roman Empire, the state of affairs after colonial pacification by the British has often been called

⁴For the first time this seems to have happened in 1923, when the attempt of the British to collect 'tribute' from the Garre led to eight Garre casualties and an exodus to Ethiopia.

⁵Interviews by Abdullahi Shongolo with Hofte elders, Daudi Dadacha and others.

⁶Raikes (1981); Schlee (1984, 1990b, 1991a, 1998, 1999); Walz (1992: 35–41).

pax britannica. The British themselves have not failed to notice that before them there was another hegemonial power in the area which succeeded in maintaining stability for relatively long periods: the Boran. In colonial records we find the phrase *pax borana*. For the period before the coming of the Boran we have no written records. But we can conclude from oral history and cultural comparisons that people who spoke Somali-like languages not unlike modern Rendille, and who had a culture or cluster of related cultures which had camel husbandry at its core, were widespread in the area. I have called this stratum Proto-Rendille-Somali or PRS (Schlee 1989a).

We can, on the ground of these distinctions, define the following four periods:

The Proto-Rendille-Somali era	before 1550
<i>pax borana</i>	c. 1550–1920
<i>pax britannica</i>	c. 1920–1963
Independence	since 1963

These periods become shorter as we approach the present. This may simply have to do with the fact that we know more about the recent past than about the remote past and therefore apply more distinctions to the former. The following summary of the history, broken down into these periods, is shorter than that in *Identities on the Move* (Schlee 1989a) and only serves the purpose of making the present volume self-contained: to round it off by putting the different parts into one historical framework for those readers who do not have the earlier work at hand.

It is difficult to mark the beginning of the Proto-Rendille-Somali era. The Somali dialects in the south differ much more from each other than those in the north. As languages tend to have undergone more differentiation in their old areas of distribution than in new ones, it is plausible to conclude that Somali origins need to be looked for in and around the southern parts of the present distribution of peoples speaking Somali dialects or Somali-like (Somaloid) languages. As the presence of the Somaloid Rendille language shows, what is now northern Kenya was part of this early, probably pre-Islamic or marginally Islamized Somaloid dispersal. Also the existence of the related Baiso language in Ethiopia makes us think of the present Kenyan-Ethiopian borderland as a candidate for an early nucleus of Somali-like peoples.⁷

Apart from some form of early Somali-like speech the other criterion for classifying people as Proto-Rendille-Somali is the cultural emphasis on camel husbandry and the associated calendar and social organization. This cultural complex may have developed in the area with the arrival of the camel or may have been brought along with it at some unknown time, presumably in the Christian era (A.D.). The clan histories of nearly all Rendille and most Gabra, Sakuye and Garre seem to go back to groups which were once characterized by the combination of features characteristic of the PRS. To the east, in the complexities of Southern Somalia local cultures and dialects, it is difficult to say which groups derived from the PRS. Some may have preserved PRS specific traits, others may have lost them and yet others, maybe groups with a stronger orientation to cattle and farming rather than camels and smallstock, may never have been typical representatives of the PRS complex. As the

⁷Fleming (1964); Lewis (1966); Lamberti (1983); Schlee (1987).

focus of the present work is on northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia, we can reserve the question of cultural strata in Somalia for future research.

The next phase, that of Boran hegemony, is already shorter. The expansion of Oromo from their southern Ethiopian cradle lands started around the middle of the sixteenth century. The first Oromo group to move south were the Warr Daya whose remainders can now be found among the Tana Orma (Schlee 1992b). We assume that the Oromo expansion took place more or less simultaneously on all sides, from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth century, to the north and west as far as Wollo and Wollega on the present border between Ethiopia and the Sudan, to the south and east as far as the Indian Ocean. The most important group to represent the Oromo in northern Kenya were the Boran. They played a hegemonial role in the area which was taken over by the British around 1920, when they succeeded to establish colonial rule more or less effectively on the local level. The Oromo expansion had important effects on the ethnogenesis of non-Oromo groups. Many PRS groups tried to evade the periodic raids by the Boran whose freshly initiated *raaba* age-grades had to undertake ritual warfare and to secure loot in the form of livestock and the cut-off genitals of slain male enemies. These initiations took place once in eight years. The Gabra Miigo were separated from the Garre in this period, because the Gabra Miigo submitted to the Boran while the Garre first fled and only submitted after a long circular migration which took them into Jubaland in Southern Somalia. Also the ancestral Gabra were separated from the Rendille in this period. The fact, that many former PRS groups now speak Oromo while others, the Rendille and some Garre, have maintained their Somaloid languages, goes back to this period. The Rendille are the only modern ethnic group among those which mainly descend from bearers of the PRS culture who have neither become linguistically assimilated by the Boran Oromo, nor undergone Islamization and inclusion in the wider category 'Somali'.⁸ The Boran managed to incorporate many non-Boran groups in a network of ritual dependence on their two High Priests, the *qallu*⁹ of the Sabbo moiety and the *qallu* of the Gona moiety, and to unite them into an internally peaceful military alliance, the *Worr Libin*, called after an area in southern Ethiopia. The groups they managed to incorporate into this alliance in what now is northern Kenya are all of Somaloid origin. They include the Gabra (Malbe and Miigo), the Sakuye who appear to have emerged as an ethnic group only after the Boran expansion and, later and less permanently the Garre, parts of the Ajuran and indirectly – under the Ajuran umbrella – groups of Degodia-Somali. No Maa-speakers like Laikipiak Maasai or Samburu became part of it. They always remained outsiders and enemies to it. It is not clear by which point of time the Boran had become established to this degree, but after it, it is surely justified to refer to this period as *pax borana*.



In the 1920s and 1930s, after set-backs during the First World War, the

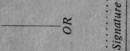
⁸ There have been some recent politically motivated polemics accusing me of anti-Oromo and pro-Somali leaning. I was said to ascribe 'Somali' origins to the Gabra and others. It therefore needs to be stressed once more that the PRS were not Somali in the modern sense ('modern Islamic Somali' as I used to say) but the bearers of that cultural stratum from which many modern Somali and non-Somali groups (Rendille, Gabra, etc.) derived to a large extent. To put it very bluntly: they were among the ancestors of some (not all) Somali and many non-Somali. Some of these polemics have been summarized in the introduction to Baxter, Hultin and Triulzi (1996). More of it can be found in non-reviewed internet sources. A somewhat more scholarly discussion of the controversy about these issues can be found in Kassam (2006) and Schlee (2008b).

⁹ Various spelled *qallu*, *qaalu*, *qaallu*, *qaalluu* etc. We prefer the first two. The variation appears to be due to compensatory lengthening: if the geminate consonant is simplified, the vocal is lengthened.

Husband's/Wife's/Father's Pass Book No.

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Left thumb impression.  OR  Right thumb impression.

Signature 

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Identity/Registration No. 10/53365 MKS

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Tribe BORANA District MARSABIT

Man'yatta MOYALE Chief G. ARI

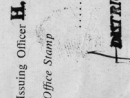
Occupation DRIVER

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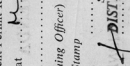
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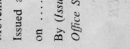
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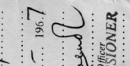
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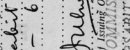
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Instruction to authorized issuing officers

1. All entries (excluding signatures) must be made in BLOCK CAPITALS.

2. One permit only may be issued on one page and each must be signed by the Issuing Officer, and be stamped with official stamp of the station of issue.

3. No permit may be issued to any applicant except on written application.

Figure 0.1 Colonial movement permit, in possession of Abdullahi Shongolo, the son of the holder

British established and slowly rigidified their rule. For some decades before, there had been an influx of Somali groups from the east, by people who claimed the status of pseudo-relatives or genealogical dependents (*sheegat*)¹⁰ of the Somali groups, mainly Ajuran, who were part of the *Worr Libin*. These immigrant Somali had started to overcrowd the Boran and their allies at the wells of Wajir and elsewhere.¹¹

The British responded to this by delineating tribal grazing lands. With motorized travel setting in, the tracks connecting the towns and trading centres of northern Kenya often acquired an additional function as grazing reserve boundaries. A system very similar to that of apartheid, later formalized in South Africa, developed in colonial Kenya. Not only was there a division between White and Black settlement areas (the 'reserves', *risaaf*), not only was the white economy given privileges and shielded against competition by Africans, nay, within the African sector itself numerous boundaries were also drawn. Like the Asians (Indians) and migrants from other parts of Kenya, the northern Somali veterans who had fought for the British in the First World War and who, often after serving additional years as *Dub 'as*, ['Red Fez', later: Administration Police, AP] in Kenya, had opted for a lump sum rather than a pension, were not allowed to live as traders among the Rendille, Gabra, or other local groups. Alien traders were restricted to the towns. Many of them decided to marry into local societies, typically at the upper end, to be allowed to live among their customers. Pass laws, like in apartheid South Africa, also existed in Kenya. To travel from one district to another one needed a permit. As can be seen from the pictures of one such permit (Figure 0.1), this system endured for years after Independence.

The ethnic macro-categories which the British recognized in northern Kenya were Galla (a term which later came to be replaced by 'Oromo') and Somali. The most important of the new boundaries drawn was therefore the Galla-Somali line, which, after a couple of shifts, developed into the present boundary between the Eastern and North-Eastern Provinces. The term 'Galla' referred to Oromo speakers like the Boran, Gabra, and Sakuye. 'Somali' by the Somali themselves and by the British, who became keen genealogists, was defined by patrilineal descent from Somali ancestors. Inconsistencies predictably developed wherever people claimed Somali genealogies but were found to speak Oromo.¹²

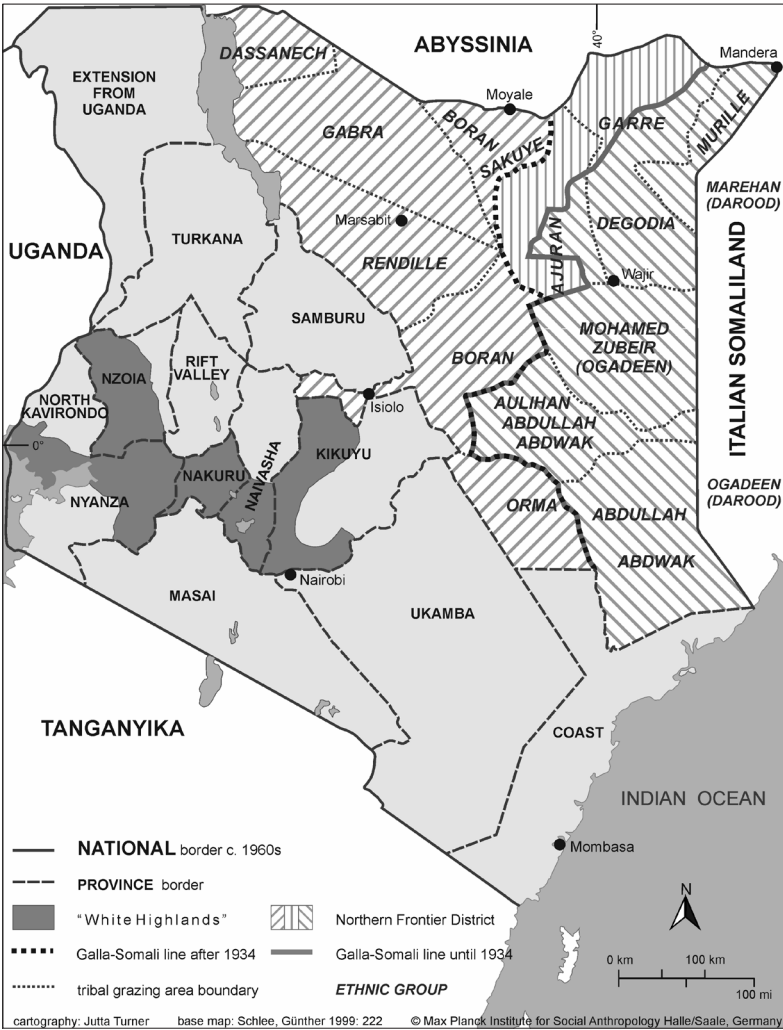
Thus not all minor units fitted very neatly into the major ones of 'Galla' and 'Somali'. Much of the subsequent chapter, *Pax Borana*, will be about the Ajuran re-affiliating themselves from the former to the latter, and further down in chapter 5 (and in our companion volume, Schlee & Shongolo 2012), we shall learn how and why at least some of them now wish to revert to the prior situation.

Being Somali and being Muslim is, in this part of the world, closely intertwined. Islamization = Somalization was the other factor which differentiated the former PRS. As some of them acquired Boran as their new language and became part of the *Worr Libin*, others – and not only others, because the process was also at work among the *Worr Libin* – became Muslims and came to be regarded as a kind of Somali, irrespective of their language, be it Boran,

¹⁰ From the verb *sheeganaya* – 'I name' [somebody else's ancestor as my own] which in turn is an autobenefactive derivative from *sheegaya* – 'I tell, narrate'. It is used for unrelated people who have rendered themselves under the protection of a strong clan.

¹¹ Kenya National Archives, summarized in Schlee (1989a).

¹² About the linguistic complexities associated with being 'Garre' cf. Schlee (2001) or Schlee (2008a: 100, 101).



Map 0.1 Boundaries in colonial Kenya (based on Schlee 1999: 222)

Somali or a Somaloid language. These identifications are still relevant in the most recent ethnic clashes. We shall see below that Islam, a universal religion with a great potential to bring peace and understanding, has been used mostly in the opposite way in the regional context: to define others as enemies and to draw lines of distinction between people who have been Islamized some time ago and people who have become Muslims more recently, to denounce the latter as *kufaar*, unbelievers, and to declare war against them to be *jihad*.

In many ways the British colonial system can be seen as the precursor of the modern ethnicization of politics. It not only sets the pattern by allotting chunks of the territory to certain categories of people (often defined by rather arbitrary criteria) which may or not have to do with applying the model of the modern European nation state on a smaller scale in Africa. Many of the boundaries drawn then now serve a new generation of strategists of exclusion as legitimization of murder or the expulsion of people who originate from other parts of the country.

Shortly before independence, in 1962, the British held a referendum, asking the people of the Northern Frontier District (NFD)¹³ whether they wanted to belong to the newly emerging independent Somalia or to Kenya, which was on its way to independence. *Uhuru na Somalia* ('Independence with Somalia') and *Uhuru na Kenya* ('Independence with Kenya') were the competing slogans. There was a majority for Somalia. But as the counting was over, negotiations with the delegation led by Kenyatta in London were too far on their way. The process towards independence of Kenya in the colonial boundaries which comprised the NFD could no longer be reversed. The British ignored the results of their own referendum.

There was no better way of telling the Government of Kenya, which became independent in 1963, that the north, with the exception of certain Boran inhabited areas, was a hostile territory which would have to be taken by force. Violence erupted immediately. A Somalia sponsored separatist guerrilla movement, known as the *shifto* from the Amharic word for 'bandit', operated in northern Kenya throughout the 1960s and Government retaliation was drastic, especially against unarmed civilians, mainly the pastoralists, who were preferred as targets because they could not fire back. Isaaq and other northern Somali traders (the above mentioned veterans and their descendants) were restricted to Isiolo, the Sakuye were concentrated in camps, 'keeps', where those parts of their herds which had survived machine gunning by Government troops died of hunger, because the interdiction of nomadic movements led to immediate overgrazing of the surroundings of these 'keeps'.¹⁴

Given the close links the Sakuye had had as members of the *Worr Libin* alliance to the Boran, it can be debated whether it was their rather recent conversion to Islam, their PRS-derived camel culture or this treatment by the Government which made many of them join the Somali *shifto*. After the dissolution of the 'keeps', the surviving Sakuye were marched by Boran guards from Eastern Province to North-Eastern Province, a march which turned out to be a

¹³The Northern Frontier District is a name which remained in use for a long time after the administrative unit it referred to had been abolished. This new entity was the amalgamation of British Somaliland and the Italian UN trust territory Somalia which lasted from 1963 to 1991. 1991 is the year of the expulsion of Siad Barre from Mogadishu which was followed by the era of the warlords. De facto, Somali unity had ceased years before, at the latest with the aerial bombings of Hargeisa by Siad Barre in 1988. On the other hand some people claim that Somali unity exists even now, although that must be an existence on paper.

¹⁴Oral accounts.