

GREATER SOMALIA AND BELONGING IN KENYA

We Do Not Have Borders: Greater Somalia and the Predicaments of Belonging in Kenya.

By Keren Weitzberg.

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This sophisticated book is a history of Kenyan Somalis (not the recent refugees) over the past century — more specifically, the nomadic Somalis who have lived in the Northern Frontier District (NFD) of Kenya for centuries and the Isaaq and Harti clans from areas along the Gulf of Aden who were recruited by colonial officers to serve as porters, soldiers, guides, and translators. Weitzberg argues that these Kenyan Somalis have been perceived as foreigners and have, therefore, been marginalized in spite of their long years of settlement in the country. For their part, Kenyan Somalis view themselves as regional and extra-territorial people and they have thus found colonial and postcolonial boundaries to be too constrictive and confining. Ironically, their ‘borderlessness’ served to marginalize and confine them, rather than provide freedom. That is, their borderlessness, as Weitzberg convincingly argues, does not fit in with neoliberal rationality ‘which envisions people as market actors operating in a world in which capital and goods flow freely across national boundaries’ (3). Moreover, the history of these Kenyan Somalis does not cohere with conventional nationalist or nativist histories. Using interviews, poems, plays, slogans, and anecdotes, alongside detailed archival research, Weitzberg examines the various ways in which these Somalis have defined themselves in Kenya in order to secure their rights as citizens.

We Do Not Have Borders proceeds roughly in chronological order. Chapter One takes us to the Northern Frontier District (NFD) in Kenya on the eve of colonial conquest where we meet Oromo and Somali speakers who have lived in this region for centuries. We learn that these groups often defined Somaliness as based on being a Muslim and belonging to clan. Chapter Two focuses on the Isaaq and Harti clans at the beginning of the colonial period in Kenya and shows how, through the 1930s, their representatives imagined themselves as both imperial citizens and members of a wider Islamic world. The British colonizers in turn saw them as quasi-foreigners and often categorized them as ‘Asiatic peoples’, a definition that sometimes gave them access to rights enjoyed by Arabs and Indians in Kenya. Ironically, these definitions would come to haunt them in the post-Second World War period, as nationalists in Kenya saw them as outsiders. In response, many of the Kenyan Somalis insisted that they were extraterritorial people with no boundaries who were part of greater Somalia as much as they were part of Kenya. But these claims did not satisfy Kenyan nationalists who demanded complete loyalty. Their skirting of borders, their refusal to unpack their belongings, and their perceived disloyalty to the Kenyan nationalist enterprise combined to further increase their liminality. This ambivalence of belonging came to a head when some separatist Kenyan Somalis in the NFD wished to secede from Kenya and become part of the of the greater Somali nation.

Chapter Five examines these secessionist conflicts (especially the Shifta War, 1963–7) and the emergence of competing notions of sovereignty, territory, and belonging at independence. Chapters Six and Seven focus on the 1980s to the present, a period that was characterized by immense suspicion of Kenyan Somalis in Kenya, some of it lingering from the Shifta War. At the same time, the clan warfare in Somalia in the 1990s produced massive numbers of refugees who moved to the NFD, just as other Somalis were moving into Nairobi and other towns in Kenya and becoming heavily involved in transnational trade. The new influx Somalis in Kenya did not help the case of the ‘indigenous’ Kenyan Somalis. All Somalis were now seen as a dangerous and alien presence in Kenya and were intensely scrutinized by the Kenyan government. Somali presence in Kenya became even more toxic when Al-Shabab violently bombed malls and universities in Kenya. All Somalis were now not just undesirable members of post-colonial Kenya; they became a serious threat to national and international security.

In spite of this hostility, many Kenyan Somalis continued to cultivate an even more flexible, overlapping model of belonging in both countries. This flexible model, Weitzberg suggests, seems to be working for them, as the current Kenyan government of Uhuru Kenyatta appears to be making positive gestures toward incorporating Kenyan Somalis into the country. Reading about this process, I could not help but think of my Kenyan Somali schoolmate, Amina Chawahir Mohamed Jibril, at Butere Girls in Western Kenya. Jibril was born and raised in Kakamega, a small town in Western Kenya and went to local schools and then went on and graduated from the Kenyan School of Law at the University of Nairobi. She is currently the Secretary of Education in Kenya, having also served as Secretary for Foreign Affairs in 2013–8. People like Jibril show, so it seems, that it is possible to be both Somali and Kenyan. Might this be a glimmer of hope for Kenyan Somalis?

We Do Not Have Borders is an important book in Kenyan historiography. Its focus on regional and diaspora peoples provides a refreshing angle, especially since most Kenyan historians have tended to emphasize the study of ethnic groups, particularly the Kikuyu and Luo. Weitzberg’s sources are rich and in particular I found her detailed analysis of the Shifta war in 1963–7 to be highly nuanced. She convincingly presents the opinions of various people in the NFD, as well as their predicaments about supporting or not supporting the war. For her, the secessionists were not ‘bandits’, as they have often been portrayed by the Kenyan government, but were in fact fighting a respectable nationalist movement, which the Kenyan government violently crushed. Ruminating on the defeat, many Kenyan Somalis in the NFD claim it was an act of God to lose the war, as staying in Kenya made it possible for them to accommodate their relatives fleeing Somalia as refugees in the 1990s. They have learned to put their defeat behind them and moved on. Perhaps — just perhaps — the Kenyan government might similarly put its animosity toward the Kenyan Somalis behind it and move on to build a more inclusive society. A close reading of *We Do Not Have Borders* would be an important first step in helping with such a transition.

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