

“Pushing Up Against The Nation-State”: Kenyan Somalis Overturning Borders, Reinventing Identity and Dissent from The Margins

The inspiration behind this dissertation stems from the authors own lived experiences of borders, having Ugandan parentage, and seeing how events in their home country of Kenya have affected the Kenyan-Somali community. This is in many aspects a dive into ways in which the writer themselves upholds structures that have, and continue to marginalize this community. Its is also import to note that this dissertation is looking at Kenyan- Somalis who have historically been, and continue to live in North Eastern Kenya and now all over Kenya, and directly speaking to and for this community. Firstly it is important to demarcate the parameters through which ‘Somali’ is viewed when speak about them being ethnically native to Kenya, Weitzberg (2019) explains:

Somali can indicate both citizenship status (citizen of Somali) and an ethnic identity. People living in Kenya who identify as Somali, but might also identify as something else (like Kenyan – Borana etc). Labels are particularly difficult for people who are both Kenyan and Somali. Includes those who might identify as Somali but not be perceived as such, including minorities excluded from dominant notions of Somalinimo.

When speaking about Kenyan- Somalis and marginalization, the idea of belonging is also muddled. Bell insists that one does not simply ontologically belong to the world or to any group of people within it. “Belonging is an achievement at several levels of abstraction” (1999:3). The Berlin conference that proceeded to the scramble for Africa saw to it that Somalis were divided five times over. By the British, French, Italians, Ethiopians and Kenyans (Weitzberg, 2017:1). Having then to redefine themselves five times over in these territories. Borders became a “physical” manifestation of deeper-rooted neo-colonialism and the western exports of the nation-state, xenophobia and notions of warped nativism. (Krishna, 2009:3).Weitzberg states that arguments that begin and end at the artificial nature of borders being the cause of an issue are indicative of lazy scholarship (2017:7) The colonial state created the distinction between native and non-native, it politicized indigenusness and reinforced these

divided through spatial segregation and bisecting legal codes. In other words being native to a place in a post- colonial sense is warped and constructed from colonialism. This becomes even more contentious when rights post independence is given to ‘natives’ as opposed to non-native settlers. (Mamdani, 1998)

Mwangi sees borders as a physical and psychological condition determined by spatial- political boundaries bringing together politics and security into the space in which one lives (2017). Mwangi outlines that Somalis who live in North Eastern Kenya and by extension, elsewhere in Kenya are ‘ungoverned’ meaning there is “unwillingness or inability to provide fundamental political goods associated with statehood. This can pertain to a physical territory or a non-physical space” (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2014). And the North Eastern region of Kenya is by far is the most economically and politically marginalized in Kenya (Mwangi, 2017). ‘Somalinized’ coined by Mwangi, shows the interplay of the Somali identity and the social construction of statelessness (2017). The social construction of Somalis as a marginalized identity is not only propagated by the state as one of its functions but also through citizen-society relations resulting in the ‘othering’ of Somalis in Kenyan society despite their nationality (Mwangi, 2017). Somalis in Kenya are effectively political actors; and are viewed as a national threat. A perception that only furthers their marginalization and reinforces their ‘outsider’ identity, the state’s repressive counterterrorism measures work to marginalize them further (Mwangi, 2017). Somalis are not the only community in Kenya that are problematized by physical and psychological borders. There are Boranas and Gabras on the Ethiopian border, Maasai on the Tanzanian border, Nubians from Sudan and so many more (Weitzberg, 2017: 8). Kenya has experienced waves of migration such that it is now home to multiple diasporas even from outside the continent, but has the largest population of Somali- identifying people living outside of Somalia (Pew Research Center, 2016). If such a borderless condition is common why are some populations treated as alien and their lifestyles pathologized? Why have Somalis become the quintessential example of the internal stranger within Kenya?

The other thing the dissertation reckons with is the construction and forceful imposition of the nation state. Kenyan Somalis have looked beyond the horizons of the territorial state and towards alternative kinds of imagined communities, even if it put them at odds with the state and vulnerable to political marginalization. In Kenya efforts by activists, scholars, politicians etc to envision a future politics less tethered to the existing nation state boundaries like 'Pwani Si Kenya' were mavericked and anticipated by Somali and Northern Kenya political thinkers (Weitzberg, 2017:13). This is a decolonial Pan- Somali sentiment which can be interpreted as an effort to dismantle borders in the region which in itself is a Pan-African sentiment.

There is a running theme of deviancy of Somalis from beginning of colonial times, in the Kenyan context even in being 'racially ambiguous' neither truly Arab nor truly African (negroid) as junk racial science would term it (Weitzberg, 2017:19). Deviant persons all suffer from a 'spoiled identity', and must make various efforts to avoid or counteract social stigma (Schur, 1980:6). Somalis disrupted the stratification process of "indigenous" Africans and foreigners. As Kenya gains independence and grows in its identity as a newly formed nation state, there are calls for loyalty to the homeland, which Somalis did not neatly fit into. In the 1960s there was an already stirring anti- Somali rhetoric weighted over the Pan-Somali movement repressed immediately through the Shifta Wars effectively stamping the idea of Somalis being foreigners on their own soil. Nairobi a cosmopolitan international big city, in the 21st century starts to become a hub for Somali business and culture like cinema, and refugee networks especially with the rise of the Somali diaspora post civil war (Weitzberg, 2017: 16). Providing alternatives for those at the margins of the political system.

The import of the nation-state, and the notions of nativism are intertwined and this dissertation also looks at the ways in which Somalis, push up against that. Somalia is often classed as a failed state this further obfuscates the ways in which Somalis view 'states' for themselves and disregards colonialism hand in this process. Further more this idea has been peddled by the USA (Weitzberg, 2017:6), which pursues a foreign policy that

prefers military intervention over diplomacy (Weitzberg, 2017:6). Somalia therefore, is only a failed state because it was created to fail.

Reference List

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November 14th 2019. 4:26 pm.