

We Do Not Have Borders: Greater Somalia and the Predicaments of Belonging in Kenya,
by Keren Weitzberg

Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2017; pp. xiv +274. \$80.00 hardback; \$32.95 paper.

Keren Weitzberg's book is a timely and thought-provoking exposition of the debate surrounding the Somali presence in Kenya. While Somalis have always formed part of Kenya's indigenous population, their place in the country is nonetheless contested. Most recently, historical patterns of othering and discrimination against Kenyan Somalis has been revived in the context of Kenya's war on terror. In particular, the shared economic and kinship connections between Somalis in Kenya and those living elsewhere in the Horn of Africa leaves them vulnerable to stereotyping as intruders and conduits for terrorism. Weitzberg addresses these controversies head on and examines how Kenyan Somalis have navigated questions about their identity and belonging since the late nineteenth century.

While the focus of the book is on Somalis living within the territorial borders of Kenya (both the nomadic Somali pastoralists that have historically lived in the north eastern corner of the country, and Somali urbanites that came to the Kenya colony from British Somaliland, Aden and Kismayo), their history is told with careful attention to Somali diasporic connections. On the one hand, these links have reinforced negative stereotyping about Somali people in Kenya, by providing ammunition for those that regard groups of people that operate outside of the nation state model as inherent security threats. On the other hand, Somali diasporic links are the foundation upon which regional and global forms of Somali social and political solidarity have developed. By facing this dilemma, Weitzberg challenges binary debates about the efficacy of territorial borders, which are often believed to be either withering away under the forces of globalization or becoming more salient as a consequence of securitization policies. Instead Weitzberg examines the processes by which

borders are continuously fought over, reimagined, and reconfigured. In doing so she asks us to rethink established ideas about borders, nations, and belonging. The book is therefore as much a history of Somalis in Kenya as it is about “Somaliness as a category and mode of thought, which has changed across time and place” (5).

The book begins with a discussion of Somaliness on the eve of colonial rule. The world of the Somali was a cosmopolitan place, where being Somali was more about Islamic identification than it was about territorial boundaries or racial categorizations. In chapter two, Weitzberg examines the early decades of British imperial rule and the reworking of Somali identity in response to imperial notions of race and citizenship. Some groups of urban Somalis were able to negotiate “non-native” status and secured increased rights and privileges within the colonial state, in the context of an imperial racial hierarchy. However, others living in the north of the colony, where colonial administrators struggled to police Somali mobility across borders faced financial and administrative neglect, and they remained mostly isolated from the rest of the colony. Both of these forms of interaction with the state meant that colonial officials came to see Somali people as somehow being “out of place” in Kenya (65). Chapters 3, 4 and 5 then deal with diverse Somali nationalist imaginaries that emerged in the years after the Second World War. Chapter 3 examines the implications of colonial development policies and new African nationalist thought on conceptions of Somaliness, while chapter four focuses on the emergence of pan-Somalism and debates over the idea of a “Greater Somali” state. In both chapters Weitzberg shows how ideas about Somali identity were articulated in the language of internationally established norms and paradigms, yet at the same time reflected other forms of belonging, which included an attachment to a nomadic and pastoral way of life. Chapter 5 deals with Kenyan decolonization and the secessionist war that was fought in northern Kenya. There is a focus on the silencing of alternative models of decolonization and on the impact of the conflict on

northern women. The final two chapters detail the fall out of the Somali secessionist war. Set against policies of marginalization and recurrent episodes of state violence, and together with the refugee crisis that has been a product of more recent civil war in Somalia, the defeat of pan-Somali nationalism has necessitated another rethinking of Somaliness. For some this has meant “forgetting” past connections to the pan-Somali project and finding new ways to belong in Kenya. Others are working out ways to be both Kenyan and Somali. Weitzberg is here attentive to the need to connect the past with the present, especially the ways in which historical memories have been repurposed to suit current circumstances.

Throughout the book, the richness of the analysis that Weitzberg offers is a product of the cutting-edge historical research that it is based on. Weitzberg has combined in-depth archival research, primarily from archives in London and Nairobi, with oral sources such as interviews, poems, and songs. These sources have been handled judiciously, with her northern Kenyan and Somali interlocutors taken seriously as political thinkers and intellectuals. It is through them that Weitzberg rethinks key episodes of Somali history within Kenya. These include the claim to “Asiatic” origin in the early twentieth century, and the history and legacy of the 1960s secessionist war. I was particularly struck by the intimacy that the oral sources bring to her book, and the way that competing local narratives and divergent memories of people, places, and events were embraced within the analysis. The result is a welcome disruption of existing understandings of this history.

Despite the trauma and violence that underpins much of the history that is on offer here, Weitzberg’s book is ultimately an optimistic one. The focus is on the ways that Somali people have navigated and responded to ever-changing social and political contexts, and she is sanguine about the future. New possibilities for inclusion and belonging have opened up in the context of political devolution and growing Somali influence in Kenya’s economy, while some of the “past futures” examined in the book offer possibilities for alternative political

configurations yet to come. This is therefore a very important book. It puts Somalis at the centre of Kenyan history rather than at the margins, it questions the key categories such as race and nation that have been central to the discipline of African studies, and it is relevant for wider debates about borders, globalization, and sovereignty.

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