

Nomads in the shadows of empires

Gufu Oba. Leiden and Boston: Brill.com/affs, 2013. ISSN: 1568-1203. 366 pp.

Reviewed by Fekadu Bekele

Africa Development Consulting, Berlin, Germany

This book about nomadic tribes in the frontier of two countries, namely Ethiopia and Kenya, deals with the impacts of two contesting Empires – Ethiopia, which had not yet transformed to a fully developed nation-state and faces thousands of drawbacks, and the British Empire, which was highly developed and a colonial power extending its imperial rule over many countries. As a matter of fact, its colonial policy impacted on the social conditions of African indigenous peoples in Ethiopia.

The main tribes affected by the contests of these two imperial powers are the Borana of Ethiopia, who were pastoralists and who were compelled to move from one frontier to the other, or within one vast area in search of water and grazing lands for their herds. The other ethnic groups are the Garre, usually called the Somalis. Although both of them were nomads and pastoralists, they are different in many respects. The Borana are peace-loving and harmonious, while the Somalis are different in terms of their social structure and psychological makeup. However, they used to have a more or less harmonious relationship before the two Empires came and began disturbing (through various mechanisms) the social norms which the two ethnic groups had exercised hitherto.

Nomads in the shadows of the empires is divided into 14 chapters, but the main context of the book focuses on how two contesting powers could disturb and at the same time shape the social relationship of different ethnic groups which were once governed by other customary laws and had their own unique norms which serves as their guiding principles.

The first chapter deals with the relationship between the Borana pastoralists and the Somali clans before the arrival and expansion of the two empires. Before those empires extended their influence over these ethnic groups in southern Ethiopia and Kenya, there was quite extensive contact between the Borana and the Somali clans. Naturally, both ethnic groups were compelled to move in different directions in search of water and grazing. Because the Ethiopian side of the frontier had ample water and grazing possibilities, the Somalis were compelled to enter areas belonging to the peace-loving Borana, who tolerated their using the wells and pastures for their herds. However, because of the absence of any kind of regulation, and since the boundaries were more porous, the groups were prone to conflict.

The Borana practiced a class system of regulating their population, herds and grazing lands. Because of the small size of the population, the Borana did not live in outlying areas. The normative rules they adhered to, included the political economy of resource control and the use of pastoral resources for their herds, without putting too much pressure on the ecology with their habitation or their use of grazing areas. Astonishingly, the Borana exercised a balanced system of resource use, controlling

population movements for centuries so as to avoid being exposed to the changing climatic conditions prevalent in arid areas. Resources belonged to the group, and since all members were governed by the Luba system, there were no conflicts related to resource use. Being heavily dependent on water resources and grazing areas, the Borana were well aware of how to use water resources sustainably.

On the other side, the Somali clans did not abide by many regulations, and believed that water resources and grazing had to be accessible to all ethnic groups, without restrictions. This contrast in the socio-economic organisation of the two groups, and their divergent approaches towards natural resource use and exploitation, became a source of conflict. However, through intermarriage and assimilation the Somalis were compelled to accept some of the Borana customs. The Borana, on the other hand, were becoming increasingly suspicious of the rapidly growing Somali population, fearing they might be overwhelmed by their sheer numbers. The intermingling between the Borana and the Garre, however, did not lead to any clear-cut social differentiation which may have culminated in conflict. Although the British tried to establish trade relations with the Somalis, and hoped to exploit Ethiopian resources through their intensive contact with the Borana people, any trade contact did not have that much of an impact in respect of changing the social structure of the ethnic groups. The tribes remained nomads, mainly dependent on cattle rearing as a source of income and wealth. The civilising mission of the British did not bring any fundamental change to the social and work organisation of the Borana and the Somali ethnic groups.

The historic victory of Emperor Menelik in 1896 over the Italian invaders and the expansion of imperial power southwards to incorporate more land as part of Ethiopia presented a great challenge for the Borana. The expansion of the two contending powers, i.e., the Ethiopians moving southwards and the British who controlled Kenya to the north, impacted heavily on the Borana. Professor Oba clearly analyses how such contending powers could determine the course and the development of certain groups by imposing new laws pertaining to resource use and by levying taxes. As the new administration of Emperor Menelik expanded and claimed more lands as its own territory, the Borana lost their independence and became subjects of the new Ethiopian imperial power. Emperor Menelik introduced a quasi-feudal relationship known as the *gabbar* system, under which all lands belonged to the Emperor, and which gave him the right to decide over resource use and allocation. The new subjects were forced to pay tributes or taxes, which altered their social relationship. To collect taxes and control the movements of the people, the new Ethiopian administration created administrative structures known as *ketamas* (military outposts) to control the annexed region, and through that to facilitate tax payments. Due to the new administration's lack of knowledge and experience, the Borana were subjected to excessive exploitation and suppression. Without understanding the socio-economic organisation of the Borana, and the benefits the tribe derived from their cattle, the new Ethiopian administration imposed heavy taxes on the people. As Professor Oba systematically shows in the book under reviews, this upset the social and economic organisation of the Borana; excessive taxation forced them to flee to Kenya, which

was under British administration. As becomes clear in the book, the British handled their own citizens very differently from the Borana. The Ethiopian administration, known as *shiftas* (bandits), used excessive force against the populace, and clearly did not have a well-structured and organised administration with qualified personnel. By contrast, the British administration had experience in administrative affairs and adopted a liberal outlook in dealing with sophisticated social and cultural issues.

The *gabbar* system of exploitation and imposed social relations changed when the Italian fascists occupied Ethiopia. The Italian occupiers explicitly demonstrated their hatred of the Amhara, in whom they saw a kind of Ethiopian nationalism. When Italy invaded Ethiopia for the second time in 1935, it was to avenge what it had lost in the battle of Adowa (1896). This time the Italians were well organised, supported by its airforce, and could easily defeat the Ethiopian army. It was therefore easy to spread propaganda against the Amhara, and to be seen among the Borana and the Somalis as their liberators from the feudal Amharas. Professor Oba describes how the Italians abolished the *gabbar* system of exploitation and social degradation, but not everywhere. While the Italians easily won the hearts of the Somalis, the Borana wavered between the Ethiopians and the Italians, depending on the latest shift in power. The Italians therefore organised the Somalis as their collaborators (*bandas*) to fight against the Amhara. Such a divide-and-rule system helped the Italians maintain their foothold in certain areas. Over time resistance grew from the Ethiopian side, and in the end the Italians were defeated. However, by creating a new Somali land, by uniting most of the scattered Somalis, the Italians implanted a new nationalistic sentiment among the Somalis which later became a source of conflict between the new Ethiopian government under Haile Selassie, and the Somalis in Mogadishu.

When Emperor Haile Selassie came back from exile and assumed power, his new administration was confronted with many problems – including the Somalis. The scattered Ethiopian forces which had ferociously fought off the Italian fascists had to be reorganised and integrated into the new administrative structure, along with other armed groups which practised banditry as a way of life.

Ethiopia, as an underdeveloped nation, did not have well-build roads and villages to control the movements of the different tribes. The regime did not have the means of containing all the forces, or the personnel to mobilise the forces for work. Emperor Haile Selassie had to reorganise the administration to bring law and order – not an easy task. The multiple and complicated problems, however, could not stop him from reversing the policies of the Italians. Old feudal relationships were reinstated, but Selassie's administration did not understand the dynamism of the social relationship the Italians had introduced. By reversing the social relationship and installing a feudal tenant system, the government consciously (or unconsciously) created a new system of exploitation and class conflicts which soon became a great challenge for his administration. However, the emperor set out to win the hearts and minds of some of the leading figures amongst the Borana and the Somalis. He achieved this by appointing them to new posts or allowing them to administer their own areas.

Although the emperor tried to consolidate his power, he was not on good terms with the British in Kenya. Since the Somalis, the Borana and other *shifita* elements were moving across the two frontiers it was very difficult to control the movement of the different groups. In addition to this, the question of citizenship could not be clearly settled, since some Borana lived on the other side of the frontier under British administration. The British in Kenya viewed the lack of effective administration and control mechanisms to stop banditry in the frontier region as an inability to deal with complex issues. After five years of intensive war, the new Ethiopian government had to start from scratch to create new administrative structures. In the absence of liberal traditions and intellectual movements, it is no wonder the Ethiopian administration could not handle the volatile situation.

Professor Oba's well-written book, *Nomads in the shadows of empires*, clearly analyses the nature of the social and cultural situations of the Borana and the Ethiopian empire. He highlights the difficulties countries like Ethiopia face, due to a lack of effective administrative structures for dealing with different ethnic groups, each with their own norms and traditions. The involvement of other powers such as the British and the Italians complicated the socio-cultural context of the region, making it extremely difficult for Emperor Menelik and later Emperor Haile Selassie to effectively rule their country. Professor Oba, himself a Borana, has grasped the complex issues facing the nomads and the difficulties in forming a nation-state under complex social conditions that did not make provision for a division of labour.

About the reviewer

Fekadu Bekele holds PhD in Development Economics. He taught as a part-time lecturer at the Free University of Berlin and the Technical and Economic colleges in Berlin. He has published many articles about the social and economic crises of African countries, and currently works as a political analyst and consultant.

He can be contacted at fekadu@t-online.de