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POLITICAL IDENTITY AS TEMPORAL COLLAPSE: ETHIOPIAN FEDERALISM AND CONTESTED OGADEN HISTORIES

DANIEL K. THOMPSON  AND NAMHLA THANDO MATSHANDA*

Abstract

Since the 1980s, analyses of African political identities have emphasized identity manipulation as a governance tool. In the Somali Horn of Africa, however, politicians' efforts to reinvent identities confront rigid understandings of genealogical clanship as a key component of identity and political mobilization. This article explores how government efforts to construct a new 'Ethiopian–Somali' identity within Ethiopia's ethnic-federal system are entangled with attempts to reinterpret clan genealogies and histories. We focus on efforts to revise the history of clans within the broader Ogaden Somali clan group and trace the possibilities and limits of these revisions in relation to legacies of colonialism as well as popular understandings of Ogaden identity. Drawing on fieldwork and archival research, we show that political struggles over Somalis' integration with Ethiopia orient around Somali clanship, but that clanship is not a mechanical tool of mobilization, as it is often portrayed. We suggest that genealogical relatedness does not equate to political loyalty, but genealogical discourse provides a framework by which various actors reinterpret contemporary events by collapsing history into the present to imbue clan, ethnic, and national identities with political significance.

THE OUTBREAK OF THE CIVIL WAR IN NORTHERN ETHIOPIA IN 2020 brought into focus the paradoxical potentials of Ethiopia's multinational federal system, commonly called 'ethnic federalism'. Established in the 1990s, Ethiopian federalism takes identity-based division to an extreme. It seeks to

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accommodate political tensions by recognizing the historical marginalization of peripheral identity groups and granting them their own subnational territories. Analysts argue that such accommodation has intense risks: elevating ethnic identity as a political principle can foment identity-oriented conflicts, undermine national unity, and encourage secessionism.¹ Both the potential for accommodation and the risk of secessionism, however, emerge not only from the political structure but also from the way political actors combine and refashion layers of identity in order to mobilize constituencies. Such processes of identity construction often involve efforts to revise history in order to make sense of present-day group boundaries and intergroup competition or alliances.² This article is about how Ethiopian federalism has shaped struggles over the political relevance of ethnic and sub-ethnic identity categories in Ethiopia's Somali Regional State (SRS), struggles that centre on reinterpreting history to make sense of the present-day politics.

Ethiopia's SRS has witnessed potent struggles over the relationship between sub-ethnic identities, ethnic categories, and national citizenship over the past two decades. For many Somalis, 'Ethiopian' refers less to a national identity than to non-Somali groups who have long dominated the Ethiopian state—particularly the predominantly Christian Amhara and Tigrayan identity groups from Ethiopia's central and northern highland regions.³ SRS has long been known as a contested borderland, a territory Somalia sought to reclaim by invading Ethiopia in 1977–1978 and which has been marked by secessionist threats before and after that conflict.⁴ Secessionist undercurrents remain, but the past decade has also seen unprecedented attempts to 'Ethiopianize' Somalis. Central to these Ethiopianization efforts are struggles to reinterpret the political significance of patrilineal clanship. This reflects the fact that clanship is a guiding paradigm by which many Somalis, as well as political analysts of the Horn, describe political loyalties.

Questioning the automatic relationship between clanship and political mobilization, our article focuses on what we call 'clan-talk': assertions that imbue Somali clanship with political significance by attributing collective behaviour and political loyalties to clan identity. We show how political actors deploy narratives and stereotypes about clan politics to

1. Liam Anderson, 'Ethnofederalism: The worst form of institutional arrangement...?', *International Security* 39, 1 (2014), pp. 165–204; Asnake Kefale, *Federalism and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia: A comparative regional study* (Routledge, New York, 2013).

2. See, e.g. Gabrielle Lynch, *I say to you: Ethnic politics and the Kalenjin in Kenya* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2011).

3. Namhla T. Matshanda, 'Ethiopia's civil wars: Postcolonial modernity and the violence of contested nationhood', *Nations and Nationalism* 28, 4 (2022), pp. 1282–92.

4. John Markakis, 'The Somali in Ethiopia', *Review of African Political Economy* 23, 70 (1996), pp. 567–70; Abdi I. Samatar, 'Ethiopian federalism: Autonomy versus control in the Somali Region', *Third World Quarterly* 25, 6 (2004), pp. 1131–54.

legitimize claims to ethnic leadership as well as inter-ethnic alliances. We focus on discourses about Ogaden Somalis, the largest clan in SRS,⁵ a group often described as competing with other clans for leadership over Ethiopia's Somalis.⁶ With reference to Ogaden identity discourses among government elites and Ogaden businesspeople in the diaspora and in SRS's regional capital, we argue that an integral component of Somalis' attempts to manage and legitimize integration with Ethiopia, as well as struggles and resistance to this integration, is the use of revisionist clan narratives to collapse history into the present. A key component of clan talk's political relevance is how clan talk collapses time, creating visceral connections to histories that help actors make sense of their political agency and legitimize their political alliances (as well as group-oriented violence) amid persistent instability.

These efforts to collapse time are performative: clan talk reshapes people's understandings of political identities' relevance, constrains certain types of political action, and enables others. They are also hotly contested: Ethiopian–Somali elites have been far from successful in creating a unified historical narrative. These two observations frame an additional step in our argument: the political relevance of revisionist clan talk in SRS lies less in its general acceptance as 'true history' than in its strategic ambiguity and multiplicity. People hailing from different clan groups and social positions often draw different conclusions about the revisionist histories' meaning and implications for the present-day politics. Moreover, clan groups vilified in discourse are not excluded from politics but may be incorporated into positions of dependence on government elites.

In sum, we contend that the image of Somali clans as discernible political units that have endured through time is, to a significant extent, a fiction, but it is a fiction constructed through constant reference to historical ancestries and visceral experiences of conflict. It is also a fiction useful for disciplining dissent and constructing inter-clan and inter-ethnic alliances by linking them to historical precedent.

5. Ethiopian census statistics are contested, but Ogaden lineages constitute a majority in five of SRS's nine administrative zones and were estimated by Human Rights Watch in 2008 to constitute 'perhaps 40 to 50 percent of Ethiopian Somalis'. Human Rights Watch, 'Collective punishment: War crimes and crimes against humanity in the Ogaden area of Ethiopia's Somali Region', (2008), <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/06/12/collective-punishment/war-crimes-and-crimes-against-humanity-ogaden-area>> (7 December 2022).

6. Historically, much of the territory that today comprises SRS was called the Ogaden. Some analysts differentiate between Ogaden as the territory and the Somali spelling Ogaadeen as the lineage, but we maintain a singular anglicized spelling for consistency with the identity categories in our historical sources and because the territory's name derives from the clan. Following some of our Ogaden informants and present-day media and social media discourse, we also use the term 'Ogadeni' as shorthand for 'Ogaden Somalis' or individuals belonging to the Ogaden clan. This is also intended to problematize constructions that represent the entire clan ('the Ogaden') as a collective actor.

Beginning in 2009, SRS politicians pioneered a radical attempt to ‘Ethiopianize’ their constituents. They renamed the territory (known as ‘Region 5’ or SRS since federalism’s introduction) as Ethiopian–Somali Regional State (*Dowladda Deegaanka Soomaalida-Itoobiya* [DDSI]) to differentiate it from neighbouring Somalia and the self-declared Republic of Somaliland. They also removed the white star (a nod to Somalia’s flag) from SRS’s flag, replacing it with a camel. Regional security functions were devolved from the primarily non-Somali federal military to SRS Liyu Police (‘special police’). In conjunction with these changes, DDSI elites promoted new historical interpretations about clan politics, secessionism, and inter-ethnic alliances in Ethiopia. These discourses, which gained influence between 2010 and the ouster of DDSI leadership amid Ethiopia’s broader political shifts in 2018, are the starting point for our empirical analysis. To address ambiguity between the territorial state and the state as an institution, we use the term SRS to denote the territory established under Ethiopian federalism and DDSI to reference the 2010–2018 regional administration of ‘Abdi Moḥamoud ‘Umar (nicknamed ‘Abdi Iley).

DDSI’s vehement push for Ethiopianization surprised many observers partly because prominent DDSI officials hailed from Ogaden clans. The name Ogaden is widely associated with secessionist conflict—with ‘turbulent Ogadeni nationalists’ chafing against Ethiopian rule,⁷ with the Ethio–Somali or ‘Ogaden’ war of 1977, and with the Ogaden National Liberation Front’s (ONLF’s) subsequent struggle for the autonomy of Somalis from Ethiopian rule.⁸ Ogaden-led Ethiopianization efforts represent a shift in local understandings of group power struggles, as well as in the categories used by analysts. Many observers of Somali clan politics describe the Ogaden as a clan in competition with non-Ogaden Somali clans but primarily, at least in recent history, struggling against the non-Somali groups at the centre of Ethiopian politics, such as Amhara and Tigrayans. In the context of federalism, however, analysts have observed the increasing ‘indigenization’ of conflict within the Somali ethnic group and even within the Ogaden clan.⁹ Today, Ogaden subgroups, especially Rer Isaq and Rer ‘Abdille clans, are seen as the parties competing for power.

The idea of a descent into clan-based factionalism accords with the argument that segmentary lineage societies—those, like Somalis, characterized by clans comprising subclans and lineages—are more prone to conflict. Political scientists have argued that clan membership provides members

7. Ioan M. Lewis, ‘The Ogaden and the fragility of Somali segmentary nationalism’, *African Affairs* 88, 353 (1989), p. 574.

8. Abdi M. Abdullahi, ‘The Ogaden National Liberation Front: The dilemma of its struggle in Ethiopia’, *Review of African Political Economy* 34, 113 (2007), pp. 556–62.

9. Tobias Hagmann, ‘Punishing the periphery: Legacies of state repression in the Ethiopian Ogaden’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8, 4 (2014), p. 728.

access to critical resources as well as protection from violence. Traditional conflict among such communities tends to play out in feuds between whole clans.¹⁰ The key argument is that conflicts between individuals in such identity structures readily scale up into conflicts between their lineage groups.¹¹ In this paradigm, Somali clans appear as relatively stable units that generate political instability. With reference to Somalia, Mohamed Haji Ingiriis argues that ‘contemporary Somalis are reverting to a pre-colonial realm where each clan had its clan sultan seeking for a clan-state of its own right’.¹² Clannishness has been called ‘the categorical imperative of Somali political practice’¹³ and is often described as the proverbial iceberg that sank Somalia’s postcolonial state-building venture.¹⁴ Anthropologists have critiqued the segmentary lineage paradigm as ‘primordialist’ and observed that genealogy functions in Somalia and elsewhere as a tool of political manipulation.¹⁵ Yet the mechanisms by which actors transmute clanship from genealogy into a political tool differ contextually. In the segmentary lineage paradigm, the mechanism by which conflicts ‘scale up’ from the individual level to broader societal violence appears self-evident: assumed genealogical relatedness mobilizes people to band together.¹⁶ In questioning the automatic relationship between clanship and political mobilization in present-day power struggles, we are also suggesting the need for a deeper analysis of mechanisms by which clanship translates or fails to translate into shared political objectives.

The notion of temporal collapse explains clanship’s continuing relevance by foregrounding how people use assertions about clan identities and histories to legitimize and delegitimize power relations. In doing so, it also expands on scholarship about the colonial and postcolonial invention of identity and the limits of this invention. Previous scholarship on African colonial history and the ‘invention of tradition’ likely overstated the colonial influence in the evolution of African traditions and underplayed the limits of colonial invention.¹⁷ This argument about constraints

10. Ken Menkhaus, ‘Calm between the storms? Patterns of political violence in Somalia, 1950–1980’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8, 4 (2014), pp. 558–72.

11. Jacob Moscona, Nathan Nunn, and James A. Robinson, ‘Segmentary lineage organization and conflict in sub-Saharan Africa’, *Econometrica* 88, 5 (2020), pp. 1999–2036.

12. Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, ‘From pre-colonial past to the post-colonial present: The contemporary clan-based configurations of statebuilding in Somalia’, *African Studies Review* 61, 2 (2018), pp. 55–56.

13. Markakis, ‘The Somali in Ethiopia’, p. 570.

14. Ioan M. Lewis, *A modern history of the Somali: Nation and state in the Horn of Africa* (James Currey, Oxford, 2002), pp. 262–310.

15. Catherine Besteman, ‘Primordialist blinders: A reply to I. M. Lewis’, *Cultural Anthropology* 13, 1 (1998), pp. 109–20; Virginia Luling, ‘Genealogy as theory, genealogy as tool: Aspects of Somali “clanship”’, *Social Identities* 12, 4 (2006), pp. 471–85.

16. Moscona, Nunn, and Robinson, ‘Segmentary Lineage Organization and Conflict’, p. 2000.

17. Thomas Spear, ‘Neo-traditionalism and the limits of invention in British colonial Africa’, *The Journal of African History* 44, 1 (2003), pp. 3–27.

on discursive invention dovetails with critiques of ‘pure’ constructivism (constructivism that focuses on identities primarily as constructed, imagined, or performed). While categories including religion, clan, ethnicity, and nationality ‘are clearly imagined and constructed,’ argues Østebø, such categories are also ‘grounded on visceral experiences.’¹⁸ The idea of collapsing history through clan-talk orients attention to how manipulation of identity by political elites draws on but also contentiously works to reframe and ‘scale up’ the visceral experiences of individuals who construct meaning through their own histories and those of close relatives.

In the first section, we describe the political context of our research. In the remainder of the article, we rethink Somali clanship in federal Ethiopia by focusing on four processes or ‘moments’ of temporal collapse. First, we discuss the blatant revisionism of DDSI official narratives. Second, we consider how such narratives draw on a foundation of colonial discourses that collapse time in different ways. Third, we discuss tensions between official discourses and popular narrations of Ogaden history. Finally, we show how these different efforts to collapse time converge in the present-day reinvention of subclan identities and histories amid political struggles over the nature of Somalis’ relationship with the Ethiopian state.

Observing federalism from the periphery

‘We chose to be part of Ethiopia. Nobody made us join Ethiopia.’¹⁹ The director of the Ethiopian–Somali Bureau of Diaspora Affairs was one among numerous DDSI officials who repeated this assertion. It was January 2018, halfway through a year of fieldwork conducted by this article’s lead author in SRS’s capital, Jigjiga, and the surrounding Ethiopia–Djibouti–Somaliland borderlands. Young Ogaden DDSI bureaucrats were leading an unprecedented push to Ethiopianize SRS’s Somalis. This project was a central concern for authoritarian regional president ‘Abdi Iley. Yet that January, DDSI’s foundations were shaking. Regional administrations in Ethiopia are appointed by federal elites and can be dismissed at will. Between 1993 and 2010, SRS had 10 presidents, whose tenures ranged from 4 months to 3 years. ‘Abdi Iley had been president for over 7 years, which was a testament to his close connections with the federal elites of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), who had appointed him. Human rights groups have documented how DDSI governed through fear and force, enabled to do so by their links to patrons in

18. Terje Østebø, *Islam, ethnicity, and conflict in Ethiopia: The Bale insurgency, 1963–1970* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2020), p. 1.

19. Field notes, Jigjiga, Ethiopia, 4 January 2018.

EPRDF's leading party, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and specifically in Ethiopia's security sector.²⁰

By 2018, DDSI elites felt their power waning. That January, the EPRDF held emergency meetings to address tensions spurred by 2 years of political protests and reprisals. In February, Hailemariam Desalegn resigned as Ethiopia's Prime Minister and was soon replaced by Abiy Ahmed. Abiy quickly moved to dismiss Ethiopia's security and military leadership, to whom DDSI elites were allegedly subservient.²¹ That August, 'Abdi Iley was ousted and arrested.

That the director of diaspora affairs voiced the assertion of Somalis' agency points to another dimension of the regime's power besides its links to federal elites. DDSI focused heavily on re-engaging diaspora Somalis, especially the Ogaden in diaspora, long perceived as staunch supporters of the region's foremost insurgency, the ONLF. Since 2010, 'Abdi Iley had travelled to cities abroad, extending Ethiopianization efforts into the global Somali diaspora.²² Much of the evidence presented in this article stems from an ethnographic study that compared the strategies of local businesspeople and diaspora investors in Jigjiga. Yet during participant observation and interviews with Jigjiga's businesspeople amid the anticipated collapse of DDSI, people continually debated the relevance of history and clan politics for the future of Ethiopian federalism. The lead author conducted 60 in-depth interviews with businesspeople and bureaucrats in 2017–2018, among whom 25 identified themselves as Ogaden, including individuals from Rer Isaq, Rer 'Abdille, and Tolomoge lineages. Most of the Ogadenis interviewed were businesspeople, including several diaspora investors, who were often connected to DDSI elites but also critical (in private) of DDSI's autocracy. Fieldwork in this context was supplemented by follow-up visits and interviews in 2019 and 2022.

At first, the Diaspora Bureau director's claim, 'We chose to join Ethiopia', appeared to reference DDSI's Ethiopianization project. Yet the director explained his assertion by pushing it back in time. He described how Ogaden leaders chose to join Ethiopia in 1948 in a conference at a village called Kali in Ogaden-inhabited territory south of Jigjiga. 1948 was a pivotal year in eastern Ethiopia's history. Italian forces invaded Ethiopia

20. E.g. Human Rights Watch, "'We are like the dead': Torture and other human rights abuses in Jail Ogaden, Somali Regional State, Ethiopia', (2018), <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/ethiopia0718_web.pdf> (1 August 2018).

21. Jonathan Fisher and Meressa Tsehaye Gebrewahd, "'Game over'? Abiy Ahmed, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front and Ethiopia's political crisis', *African Affairs* 118, 470 (2019), pp. 194–206.

22. Daniel K. Thompson, 'Respatializing federalism in the Horn's borderlands: From contraband control to transnational governmentality', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 37, 2 (2022), pp. 295–316; Daniel K. Thompson, 'Visible and invisible diasporas: Ethiopian Somalis in the diaspora scene', *Bildhaan* 17 (2017), pp. 1–31.

in 1935 and governed Somali-inhabited eastern Ethiopia as part of their neighbouring colony, Somalia. During World War II, British and Ethiopian patriot forces ousted the Italians and restored Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie. While the rest of Ethiopia was returned to Ethiopian sovereignty, most of the territory that is today SRS was retained under the British Military Administration (BMA). Some Somalis and British authorities sought to sever this territory from Ethiopia and unify it with neighbouring Somalia and British Somaliland to form 'Greater Somalia'. In the end, however, Britain's Home Government acceded to international pressure and returned the region to Ethiopia, beginning with Jigjiga and its surrounds in 1948 and completing the handover of grazing areas along Ethiopia's eastern border (the Haud and Reserved Areas) in 1955. The Mogadishu-based Somali Youth League mobilized local affiliates to agitate against this handover, resulting in violent protests in Jigjiga in 1948.²³

The article's second author conducted field and archival research on identity construction during the BMA rule, which involved conducting participant observation and collecting oral histories with individuals and families in Harar and Jigjiga in 2011–2012 (near the beginning of DDSI rule), as well as analysing British and Ethiopian archives.²⁴ Our analysis weaves together insights from these two projects.

DDSI's revisionist history: the Kali narrative

Most histories agree on a series of events demonstrating Somalis' misgivings about Ethiopian rule in the 1940s. In 1944, Ogaden leaders petitioned BMA authorities not to return the territory to Ethiopian rule. Uncertain of the region's future, they nevertheless retained pragmatic contacts with Ethiopian officials. In 1947, Ogaden leaders joined other Somali groups in a second petition against the return to Ethiopian sovereignty. Despite riots in Jigjiga, however, 'the population of the Ogaden as a whole bowed to the inevitable', and the handover was completed relatively peacefully.²⁵ Histories sympathetic to Somali perspectives decry the 'betrayal of the Somalis'

23. Cedric Barnes, 'The Somali Youth League, Ethiopian Somalis, and the Greater Somalia idea, c. 1946–48', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 1, 2 (2007), pp. 277–91.

24. Both authors conducted in-person archival research at the UK National Archives Public Records Office, Kew Gardens, with a focus on Colonial Office (CO), Foreign Office (FO), and War Office (WO) documents from Ethiopia and Somaliland from 1890 to 1955 (especially CO 534 and 535 series and the FO 371, 401, and 1015 series). Matshanda conducted archival research at the National Archives and Library of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa; the Institute of Ethiopian Studies Library, Addis Ababa University; and the Harar Documentation and Archives Centre, Arthur Rimbaud Museum, Harar, with a focus on the Harar Conference proceedings (1955–1956). Thompson also obtained British maps of the Ethiopia–Somalia border areas and Somali clan territories (drawn from the 1880s through 1950s) from Weston Library, Oxford University.

25. Lewis, *A modern history*, p. 130.

and the sacrifice of local interests for British prestige.²⁶ Others contest the rosy picture of British rule and point out the injustices of the BMA administration that placed Somalis (especially Ogadenis) in an ambivalent position, discontent with the BMA and yet pressured to reject Ethiopian rule.²⁷

The claims voiced by DDSI elites reject this historical evidence. They partake in a revisionist narrative that asserts Ogaden agency against British colonial aspirations. A textual account of the Kali Conference appears in a state-backed revisionist history published in 2017:

During this meeting, which took place between men from the British colonial administration and most *ugaass*, *garaads*, *suldaans*²⁸ and other influential people in the region, the cultural leaders were advised to choose between the British colonial administration and Haile Selassie's Empire. The leaders preferred to throw in their lot with the Ethiopian Empire. The council of elders, seeing that they could gain from cooperation with Ethiopia, expressed the motto, 'The staff [of leadership] is given to the man from whom you can take it away'.²⁹

With this sentiment, the elders agreed that it was better to come under the sovereignty of a distant Addis Ababa than to join a British-driven Greater Somalia. Though it is not specified in the passage, the man who voiced the motto is usually said to have belonged to the Moḥamed Zubeyr Ogaden clan, to which the Rer Isaq and Rer 'Abdille subclans belong.

The story's veracity is widely doubted among Jigjigans. One Ogaden academic versed in regional history opined, 'I never heard that story before the current administration came to power'.³⁰ Yet its ubiquity in DDSI discourse reflects its importance as a legitimizing narrative for present-day Ethiopianization efforts. By 2017, DDSI labelled prominent buildings with names like Kali Mall, and private businesses likewise signalled their loyalty by adopting the moniker. The Kali narrative operates in a discursive ecosystem of revisionist mythologies and symbolic interventions in SRS's 'memorial landscape' that seek to legitimize the DDSI-led Ethiopianization of Somalis.³¹ It is not simply questionable history. It is, rather, part of

26. Louis FitzGibbon, *The betrayal of the Somalis* (Rex Collings, London, 1982); David D. Laitin and Said S. Samatar, *Somalia: Nation in search of a state* (Westview Press, Boulder, 1987), pp. 64–67.

27. Sylvia Pankhurst, *British policy in eastern Ethiopia: The Ogaden and the reserved area* (Sylvia Pankhurst and Richard Mayne's Press, Essex, 1946).

28. *Ugaas*, *garaad*, and *suldaan* refer to traditional leadership designations.

29. Maxamed Muxumed Galaal, *Jalleeco: Taariikhdiid dadka Iyo deegaanka Soomaalida Itobiya* (Kali Publishers, Jigjiga, Ethiopia, 2017), pp. 72–73. All translations from Somali by Daniel Thompson.

30. Interview, Jigjiga, 24 September 2017. All interviews cited were conducted on condition of anonymity due to the political environment. Interviewee names provided in the text are pseudonyms.

31. Rony Emmenegger, 'Unsettling sovereignty: Violence, myths and the politics of history in the Ethiopian Somali metropolis', *Political Geography* 90 (2021), 102,476.

self-conscious efforts to mobilize shared understandings of the relationship between agency and political structure among Somalis who broadly feel marginalized after more than two decades of Ethiopian federalism. The Kali narrative reclaims Ogaden agency by presenting Ogaden leaders as shrewd and strategic Ethiopianizers working to retain their independence from non-Somali colonizers.

At the same time, a crucial aspect of the narrative is that it is productively open-ended and multivalent. Many civilians listening to this history understood it to mean that DDSI leaders were pursuing Ethiopianization as a temporary strategy but ultimately planned to *secede* from Ethiopia. This is a subtext of the adage: ‘The staff [of leadership] is given to the man from whom you can take it away’. The imagery draws on a historical ethos among Somalis that some have called egalitarian or nonhegemonic—the fact that Somali leaders (marked by possessing a staff, *ul*) historically faced the possibility of dismissal and replacement.³² In sum, the Ogaden decision to join the Ethiopian Empire was premised on the understanding that this choice could be reversed. This secessionist subtext plays on sentiments of pan-Somalism. Such sentiments are widespread among older Somalis who supported the Greater Somalia vision of the 1940s and the ONLF’s recent struggles for autonomy. Yet they are also present among some of the younger generation. For example, Warsame, an Ogaden diaspora businessman in his late 20s, supported Ethiopianization because he saw it as the path to SRS’s independence: ‘Look, this is not the colonial era. You don’t get independence just by the gun’, he argued. Independence is more likely to come through ‘agreeing to certain things with the Ethiopian government, and sort of parting ways peacefully’.³³

The Diaspora Bureau director’s assertion elides 80 years of history between the period of African liberation in the mid-twentieth century and Ethiopian–Somali politics today. In doing so, it collapses the Kali moment into the present. The ‘we’ that chose to join Ethiopia is simultaneously a group of Ogaden elders in the 1940s and a present-day group of young politicians navigating the tensions between secessionist sentiments and the promises of Ethiopianization. To analyse this discursive collapse of time and its relevance for political identification, we follow the threads of the Kali narrative to the British occupation of Ethiopia in the 1940s, which was a key moment for the politicization of clanship amid struggles over colonial subjecthood.

32. E.g. Axmed Cabdi Haybe, *Qamaan Bulxan: Taariikh iyo maansooyin* (Jigjiga University, Jigjiga, Ethiopia, 2017), p. 28.

33. Interview, Jigjiga, 8 December 2017.

Colonial invention and its limits in segmentary lineage

Terrence Ranger's idea of 'the invention of tradition' positions revisionist histories in a longer trajectory of colonial and later nation-state manipulations of history.³⁴ Other observers, however, convincingly show that colonial invention was limited as Africans contested colonial narratives.³⁵ In an important sense, DDSI's Kali narrative appears as a sheer invention: we have found no record of the Kali Conference in British archival documents from the 1940s or in Ethiopian archives related to the Harar Conference.³⁶ If such an event did happen, it appears to have had little effect on the return of Ogaden territory to Ethiopia. Yet a close reading of colonial-era records focusing on Ogaden clan politics does not simply debunk DDSI's historical invention in favour of an accurate account of Ogaden marginalization. Instead, it reveals how British and Ethiopian officials, as well as Somalis at that time, were also engaged in struggles to interpret and reinterpret the political significance of identity categories and their connection to histories that might serve as precursors for redrawing boundaries of citizenship. The work of collapsing time may legitimize present-day traditions and power structures by pushing them back in time, but temporal collapse signifies a more multi-directional process in which historical moments re-emerge forcefully as reference points upon which actors seize to understand and dispute present boundaries of political identity.

Colonial clan-knowledge

Clanship has long been a pivotal aspect of Somali identity and social organization; colonial powers did not invent it. British and Ethiopian administrators who converged on what became the Ethiopia–Somalia borderlands in the late 1800s faced a bewildering array of Somali pastoralist kinship units moving across the landscape. These movements and groupings were shaped not only by clanship but also by inter-clan alliances as pastoralist groups moved and jostled with each other for resources. From the beginning, the interface between clanship and colonialism proved unstable: clan

34. Terrence Ranger, 'The invention of tradition in colonial Africa', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (eds), *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983), pp. 211–62.

35. Carolyn Hamilton, *Terrific majesty: The powers of Shaka Zulu and the limits of historical invention* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1998); Spears, 'Neo-traditionalism and the limits of invention'.

36. Perhaps such a conference went unrecorded by colonial sources, but it appears unlikely that it would have been simply ignored. Even British administrators who expressed a desire for the peaceful transfer of sovereignty observed that there was support for Ethiopian rule in Jigjiga, but much less so among the Ogaden. See, e.g. FO 371/69402 'Future of Ogaden and the Reserved Areas'; correspondence in FO 1015/59; WO 230/236 'Eventual Return of Ogaden and Reserved Areas to Old Management.'

leaders who aligned themselves too readily with colonial powers sometimes lost their popular legitimacy. Others used colonial powers as allies in their efforts to claim leadership over a lineage group.³⁷

If clanship was not invented, it was, nevertheless, shaped by a powerful idea that recast clanship in the colonial mould: the idea that there exists a 'true' Somali lineage system that, if documented, would make sense of Somalis' political behaviour and serve as a basis for determining their subjecthood. The Ethiopia–Somaliland border was delimited in 1897, but Somali herders and traders continued to move back and forth between British and Ethiopian territory. In fact, the border's demarcation, far from settling the matter of which Somalis were British and which were Ethiopian subjects, initiated a decades-long effort among British authorities to rationalize Somali lineages and their relationship to 'traditional' grazing territories that could provide a basis for claiming Somalis even within Ethiopian territory as British subjects.³⁸ These concerns were largely oriented around Isaq clans, who were recognized as British subjects but sometimes lived, grazed livestock, or operated as traders in Ethiopian territory. In Ethiopia, these British-protected clans regularly jostled with Ogaden clans who fell under Ethiopian sovereignty, especially the Rer Isaq Ogaden, whose relationship with the Isaq was characterized by competition and livestock raiding as well as intermarriage and trade. Officials followed Somali conceptions of identity by interpreting conflicts among these groups in terms of kinship distance: Ogaden and Isaq are distant in Somali genealogies. However, neither the Ogaden nor the Isaq were unified groups, nor were they only in conflict with each other.

Conflicts among Somali groups became deeply intertwined with colonial power struggles in the overlap of British and Ethiopian imperialisms. Ethiopian rule was defined by the dominance of non-Somali officials and military-linked Ethiopian settlers who mainly identified as Amhara, more a religious identity at the time than one based on lineage. These settlers were known as *neftegna*, a word today associated with violent efforts to establish imperial authority.³⁹ The overriding aim for Ethiopian officials was to secure the border area in order to collect revenue from trade and pastoralist production. Ethiopian rule and revenue collection models were more

37. Daniel K. Thompson, 'Capital of the imperial borderlands: Urbanism, markets, and power on the Ethiopia-British Somaliland boundary, ca. 1890–1935', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 14, 3 (2020), pp. 534–36.

38. Namhla T. Matshanda, 'Constructing citizens and subjects in eastern Ethiopia: Identity formation during the British Military Administration', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 13, 4 (2019), pp. 661–77; Samuel Negash, 'Colonial legacy, state intervention and secessionism: Paradoxical national identities of the Ogaden and the Ishaq clans in Ethiopia', in Bahru Zewde (ed.), *Society, state and identity in African history* (Forum for Social Studies, Addis Ababa, 2008), pp. 275–98.

39. Teshale Tibebe, *The making of modern Ethiopia 1896–1974* (Red Sea Press, Trenton, NJ, 1995).

amenable to sedentary and agricultural populations and, more generally, oriented towards territorial definitions of subjecthood. However, as they began to impose rule over Somalis, Ethiopian officials adapted to the fluid social landscape by adopting forms of indirect rule. From 1900 onward, local administrators focused on co-opting clan representatives to settle in—or at least regularly visit and pay tribute to—Ethiopian outposts. Somalis near Ethiopia's colonial outposts sometimes found scope to profit from collaboration with Ethiopian authorities, and both Ethiopian and British colonial organization came to depend on Somali structures of authority, encompassing clan elders, clan police, and 'chiefs', a somewhat inaccurate catch-all term.⁴⁰

In the borderlands, structures of British and Ethiopian indirect rule were prone to overlap. Ethiopian administrators sought to impose taxation on British-protected clans grazing in Ethiopian territory, and British Somaliland officials often found that their supposed subjects were simultaneously liaising with or even paying tribute to Ethiopian officials. In part, these struggles drove British attempts to map out the lineages and 'traditional' grazing grounds of clans, with the idea that understanding the relationship between clan and territory would provide a legal basis for subjecthood.⁴¹ From the late-nineteenth century, British interactions with Isaq interlocutors gave them detailed information about Isaq, resulting in early colonial maps that delineated territories of Isaq subclans from the broadly defined 'Ogaden' Ethiopian territory to the south.⁴² As time went on, however, colonial mediation between lineages over cross-border access and grazing territories drove the continual production of more detailed official knowledge about clan structures.

British occupation of eastern Ethiopia during the BMA provided additional impetus and opportunity to produce more detailed knowledge about Ogaden clans and their territoriality. A 1945 map displays approximately 19 Ogaden clan territories in place of the 'Ogaden' label prevalent on earlier maps (Figure 1). Maps and clan diagrams from Ioan M. Lewis' work a decade later closely approximate the same list of names, pointing to what Lidwien Kapteijns calls a 'colonial consensus' among Somalis and colonial authorities about which identity categories mattered.⁴³

40. Thompson, 'Capital of the imperial borderlands'.

41. Daniel K. Thompson, 'Border crimes, extraterritorial jurisdiction, and the racialization of sovereignty in the Ethiopia-British Somaliland borderlands during the 1920s', *Africa* 90, 4 (2020), pp. 746–73.

42. See, e.g. 1891 sketch map in FO 403/155, Inclosure [*sic*] 2 in No. 60 (all archival references are to UK Public Records Office [PRO] file numbers).

43. Lidwien Kapteijns, 'I. M. Lewis and Somali clanship: A critique', *Northeast African Studies* 11, 1 (2010), pp. 1–23.

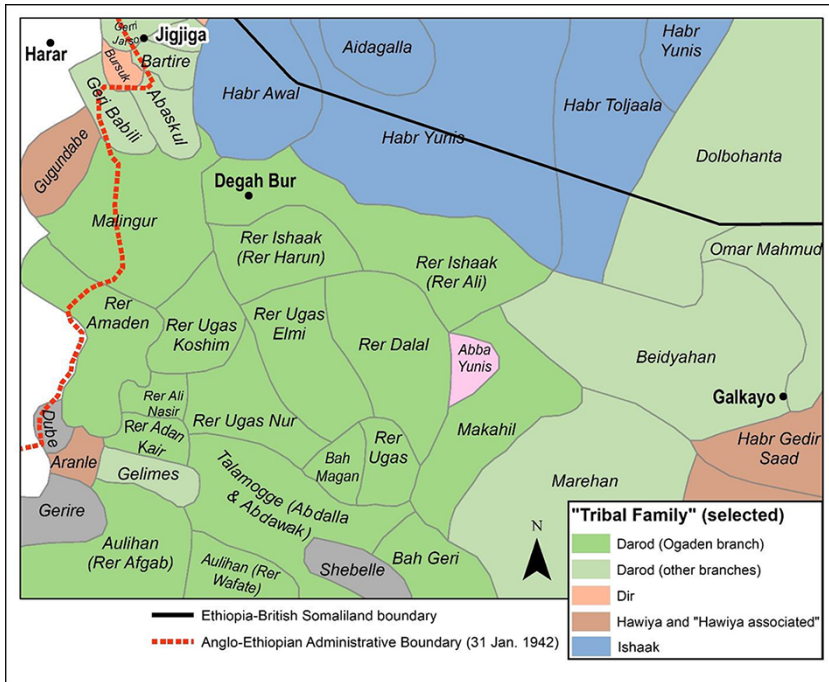


Figure 1 Colour-coded rendering of northern Ogaden clan territories as envisioned by BMA officials in ‘Tribal map of Somalia and British Somaliland’, 1 January 1945. Map drawn by authors based on E51(117) in Weston Library, Oxford. Clan territories and names are almost identical to those used by I. M. Lewis in a map drawn in his 1961 book, *A pastoral democracy*.

‘Clan-talk’ in colonial governance

British and Ethiopian officials were not simply concerned with documenting clan structures and territories. They also attributed political meaning to clanship to justify policies targeting clans for accommodation or punishment. These discourses about political personalities and loyalty also shaped the colonial consensus.

Neither the British nor the Ethiopians sustained a stable presence in Ogaden territory prior to the 1940s, despite the existence of some Ethiopian garrisons. Colonial knowledge about Ogaden politics was heavily mediated by Ogaden leaders who travelled to colonial outposts or liaised with the (often punitive) expeditions sent to the Ogaden. Political discourse among such Somali leaders circulated widely in the form of oral poems by

which leaders explained and legitimized their political aims. Such poetry is full of clan-talk, including derogatory labels and insinuations leaders imposed on rival groups. Ogadenis often labelled Isaq as *Iidoor*—‘sell to me’. This label reflected Isaq merchants’ intermediary position between coastal markets and the pastoralist interior, but it also insinuated that the Isaq had abandoned Somali pastoralist tradition. Ogaden Somalis were regularly called *Cagdheer* (long-foot). Similar insults appear in Somali interpretations of inter-clan relations under colonialism. For example, as Isaq herders and traders used British backing to stretch their reach into Ogaden-inhabited lands during the 1910s–1920s, Dhulbahante poet ‘Ali Duḥ noted this with a famous jab: ‘The Ogaden fools—Doollo was taken from them’.⁴⁴

The struggle with British-protected Isaq for access to resources pushed Ogaden leaders at various periods to seek alliances with Ethiopian officials. However, until at least the 1940s–1950s, Somalis were categorically excluded from the possibility of equal status with Ethiopia’s governing elites. For Amhara administrators, the boundaries that separated them from their Somali subjects were mainly religious (Christian versus Muslim) but also based on the spatial separation between town-based Amhara and the threatening rural natives.⁴⁵ Perceptions of Ogadenis as a threat to Ethiopia’s Christian imperialism likely deepened in the tumultuous 3-year rule of Ethiopia’s designated emperor Lij Iyasu (1913–1916), who departed from previous tradition by liaising with Muslim leaders. While Iyasu escaped an initial attack on Harar by hardline Christian elites in 1916, Ethiopian forces reportedly captured several Ogaden leaders who supported him.⁴⁶ Cedric Barnes notes that revisionist histories have sought to revitalize Iyasu’s image as a conciliatory ruler with a potentially inclusive vision for Ethiopia’s minorities.⁴⁷ However, Ethiopian state discourse continued for decades to dismiss Somalis and other non-Christians as what Emperor Haile Selassie, writing in the 1930s, called ‘savages and pagans’.⁴⁸

Ideas about savagery versus civilization were also potent in British thought, but among British imperialists, the organization of Somali identities through patrilineal lineage lent itself more specifically to racializing beliefs that political behaviours were hereditary. To explain some British-protected clans’ support for the anticolonial *jihad* led by the Ogaden religious figure Sayyid Moḥamed ‘Abdullah Ḥassan, in 1901 Somaliland’s Vice-Consul Cordeaux contrasted the ‘peacefully-disposed coast tribes of the Habr Awal [Isaq]’ with the ‘more turbulent and unruly’ clans to the

44. Thompson, ‘Border crimes’, p. 762.

45. Østebø, *Islam, ethnicity, and conflict*, p. 156.

46. Cedric Barnes, *The Ethiopian state and its Somali periphery circa 1888–1948*, (University of Cambridge, unpublished PhD dissertation, 2000), p. 90.

47. Barnes, ‘The Ethiopian state’, p. 91.

48. Haile Selassie, *My life and Ethiopia’s progress, 1892–1937*, trans. Edward Ullendorft (Research Associates School Times, Barbados, 1999), p. 118.

east.⁴⁹ In 1912, medical officer Ralph Drake-Brockman equated Somali clans or 'tribes' with distinct 'races'.⁵⁰ These assumptions and the clan-talk that accompanied them extended into British understandings of Ogaden clans. For example, a 1905 report described the Tolomoge Rer 'Abdallah as 'good people', with the qualification: 'that is to say, better than the other Ogaden tribes'.⁵¹ Such assertions flattened contemporary allegiances and behaviours into a timeless aspect of clanship. They also served strategic purposes: to promote an image of British Somaliland clans (especially Isaq) as more obedient and to de-legitimize Ethiopian governance over Somalis.

Such clan-talk congealed into shared understandings about different clans' supposed loyalty and amenability to governance, shaping the interplay of colonial rule and Somali response. In the 1940s, as British officials, for the first time, sought to govern Ogadenis as their own colonial subjects, they justified their occupation and delegitimized Ethiopian rule by describing conflict as endemic to the Ogaden. Echoing five decades of repeated assertions that Ethiopia's Somalis were inherently troublesome, Major Young wrote in 1943 that 'prior to 1935'—the beginning of Italy's occupation of Ethiopia—'the Ogaden was certainly one of the more unruly parts of Africa'.⁵²

Contesting the colonial consensus

This is the political context in which segmentary lineage entered the scene as an analytic concept for understanding Somali politics. Armed with the theory of segmentary lineage from his Oxford mentor, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Ioan Myrddin Lewis arrived in British Somaliland in 1955, as the Haud and Reserved Areas were being transferred back to Ethiopian sovereignty. Lidwien Kapteijns suggests that Lewis' segmentary lineage paradigm does not simply observe reality but 'has *contributed to* the clan discourse that continues to dominate thinking about Somalia today'.⁵³ Our analysis corroborates this argument.

The notion of temporal collapse, however, foregrounds how the overgeneralizing assertions and historical narrations employed in clan-talk intersect with visceral realities of kinship as well as the contested narration and re-narration of group histories in ways that shape political subjectivity. Somali lineages are structured by shared descent from presumed ancestors, and deciding which ancestors *matter* in narratives explaining clan history is always potentially fraught with disagreement. Because lineage leaders are

49. FO 403/313, Inclosure 2 in No. 56.

50. Ralph E. Drake-Brockman, *British Somaliland* (Hurst & Blackett, London, 1912), p. 86.

51. FO 401/10, Inclosure 2 in No. 62.

52. Young, 'Future of the Somali territories' CO 535/138/13.

53. Kapteijns, 'I. M. Lewis and Somali clanship', p. 3.

assumed historical individuals, these contests lend themselves to revisionist histories that assign value to groups through what Liisa Malkki calls ‘mythico-histories’⁵⁴ of ancestors. This means that levels of ancestry may be latent in the segmentary lineage framework in specific political contexts only to re-emerge later as subjects of historical reinterpretation. This historical reinterpretation, rather than some inherent characteristic of the lineage system, becomes a key mechanism for transmuting shared identity into political mobilization.

As a case in point, reference to Rer ‘Abdille as a relevant level of identity is absent from colonial maps and Lewis’ clan diagrams as well as the hundreds of English-language colonial documents we searched. These documents spanned the period from the 1890s to the 1950s. As references given earlier show, however, colonial documents refer to Rer Isaq and to numerous subclans such as Malingur, Rer Amadin, and Rer Warfa that are grouped as Rer ‘Abdille in today’s discourse. The issue is not that Rer ‘Abdille did not exist but that alongside other latent categories in Ogaden segmentary lineage (e.g. Bahale or Miyir Walal), it was hardly relevant as an identity category until people worked to politicize it. Reflecting this dynamic nature of clanship and its latent categories that can emerge contextually, analysts working in different places and times have offered different versions of Ogaden lineage divisions. A lineage diagram drawn by a Malingur informant in 2018 offers a simplified version of the lineage (Figure 2). This diagram differs from diagrams drawn by prominent analysts, including Abbink,⁵⁵ ‘Abdallah ‘Umar Mansur,⁵⁶ Lewis,⁵⁷ and Little.⁵⁸

In sum, colonial authorities’ efforts to construct clan-knowledge were not neutral efforts to document reality. A ‘colonial consensus’ emerged not only around the clan structure but around the inherent political characteristics of lineage groupings that happened to be relevant at the time. The Ogaden, in particular, were marked as turbulent and unmanageable, an idea that contributed to regular armed interventions as a governance strategy in Ogaden territory before and during the BMA.⁵⁹ Given this context, the Kali narrative potently captures at least one aspect of the colonial scene:

54. Liisa H. Malkki, *Purity and exile: Violence, memory, and national cosmology among Hutu refugees in Tanzania* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995).

55. Jan Abbink, *The total Somali clan genealogy*, 2nd ed. (African Studies Centre, Leiden, 2009). <<https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/handle/1887/14007>> (30 November 2022).

56. Cabdalla Cumar Mansuur, *Taariikhda afka iyo bulshada Soomaaliyeed: Daraasaad af iyo dhaqan*, 2nd ed. (Looh Press, Leicester, 2016), p. 242.

57. Ioan M. Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa: Somali, Afar and Saho*, New edition (Haan Associates, London, 1994), p. 22.

58. Peter D. Little, *Somalia: Economy without state* (The International African Institute, Oxford, 2003), p. 50.

59. See, e.g. Pankhurst, *British policy in eastern Ethiopia*, p. 21.

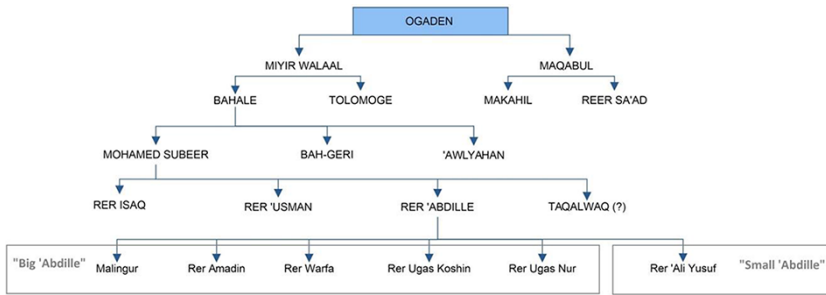


Figure 2 Segmentary lineage diagram of Rer 'Abdille Ogaden, drawn by Malingur informant, Jigjiga, June 2018.

Ogaden leaders hardly trusted British aspirations, which left them in an ambivalent position on the eve of decolonization.

Reliving Ogaden history: temporal collapse among Ogaden civilians

The fact that what is today SRS was handed back to Ethiopia relatively peacefully indicates that many Ogaden leaders accommodated the return to Ethiopian sovereignty. Some of these same leaders, however, later rejected Ethiopian rule. This included the 1963 rebellion led by Makhtal Dahir (Rer Isaq), who led a tumultuous career from Ethiopian administrator to rebel leader. During the 1970s, supporters of Somalia's President Siyad Barre mobilized Ogadenis to join the Western Somali Liberation Front rebellion. This scaled up into the 1977 War. After Somalia's military was defeated in Ethiopia, the ONLF arose in 1984 to contest the brutal homogenizing policies of Ethiopia's Derg regime. When the EPRDF coalition took control of Ethiopia in 1991, they invited the ONLF to take leadership in Somali Region. ONLF leaders quickly announced plans to hold a referendum on independence from Ethiopia. They launched an armed rebellion when the EPRDF intervened to prevent the referendum and to oust the ONLF administration.

In light of this more recent history, Ogaden identity has often stood in for Somali identity in Ethiopia, but with a secessionist valence: 'the majority of the [Ethiopian] population, if you tell them, "I'm Somali of Ethiopia," they would never believe that Somalis live in Ethiopia,' a non-Ogadeni informant reflected. 'But if you say, "I'm Ogaden," they've heard that name many times ... as rebels.'⁶⁰

60. Interview, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 30 March 2018.

Memories of violence at the hands of non-Somali Ethiopian authorities, especially from the 1970s until the mid-2000s, disrupted DDSI efforts to link today's political shifts to the 1940s. Ogaden civilians in Jigjiga, even those with kinship links to DDSI officials or who sympathized with Ethiopianization, often drew on starkly different historical moments to navigate the present-day politics. This corroborates Tobias Hagmann's finding that narratives about Ogaden collective experience in Ethiopia are marked by violence and marginalization.⁶¹ Yet these narratives do not just reflect past experiences. People viscerally relive and re-narrate their histories, collapsing time as they work to construct shared understandings of how the past relates to their present loyalties.

Ogaden intellectuals and businesspeople from the diaspora and from the region often met in small private groups during Ethiopia's major political transformations in 2017–2018. Initially, even some of those who were critical of DDSI's human rights abuses believed that they could influence DDSI leaders and shape the region's future. Jamal, for example, returned from North America in 2016 as a political activist. He described himself as a long-time advocate of Ethiopianization and recalled pushing ONLF leaders in the 1990s to give Ethiopian federalism a chance. Despite this pro-Ethiopia stance, Jamal summed up the intergenerational tensions between Ogadenis and non-Somalis with a striking statement about historical animosities, originally told to him by a non-Somali: 'The five-birr *lij* [a derogatory term for an Amhara prostitute's son] and the Ogaden boy can never live together'. Jamal explained: the first thing the Amhara mother will tell her son about his absent father is that 'the Ogaden killed him'. On the other side, the Ogaden boy is warned of two enemies: the hyena and the Amhara.⁶²

Violence and marginalization populate visceral memories that contest the Kali narrative. At the end of June 2018, Jamal travelled with 'Abdi Iley and his advisors to attend the opening of the Calub and Hilala oil wells in the Ogaden. Immediately upon his return to Jigjiga, he was invited to a gathering hosted by Muna, a woman in her 50s who fled Ethiopia as a child and had recently returned. While DDSI officials were celebrating the oilfields' opening, Jamal painted a bleak picture of the drilling operations, which he claimed employed no Somalis and only benefited federal elites and Chinese investors. His description sent Muna into recollection: she recounted watching her father's limp form hanging in the middle of Qabri-dahar in the 1980s. After he was hanged, Amhara administrators of the Derg regime left his body to rot for a week in full view, forcing the populace to see and smell the price of (suspected) secessionism. Muna immediately

61. Hagmann, 'Punishing the periphery'.

62. Interview, Jigjiga, 12 June 2018.

returned from the memory to the present-day politics of federalism with a lament: ‘This is terrible colonialism’.⁶³

Such narratives of violence differ starkly from DDSI’s efforts at historical revisionism in two main respects. First, they tend to make sense of Ethiopian federalism by referring to events in the 1960s–1990s, the tumultuous time that DDSI narratives elide. Second, rather than emphasizing Ogaden agency, they highlight Ogaden marginalization that connects present-day governance to colonial history. Indeed, Ethiopia’s pivot towards federalism did not eliminate experiences of violence. For example, a 34-year-old Rer Isaq businessman recounted watching his father die after being tortured by Ethiopian soldiers.⁶⁴ Another Ogaden (Tolomoge) investor in his late 30s described how his father was assassinated by federal officials.⁶⁵

The centrality of these narratives in gatherings and personal histories reveals Ogaden identity as a locus of traumatic memory that affirms a collective experience of violence. To paraphrase an ethnographer’s findings in a different setting, the issue is less that Ogaden Somalis have made war but that war has forged Ogaden as a potent collective identity.⁶⁶

It is crucial, however, that such experiences of violence do not translate directly into a unified political outlook or strategy. Throughout the past century, even as many Ogadenis suffered at the hands of violent Ethiopian governance, opinions have differed on paths forward. Jamal, for example, saw Ethiopianization as the only solution to Somalis’ marginalization in Ethiopia. He supported DDSI in principle because of its commitment to Ethiopianization. It is telling that some avowed secessionists, like Warsame, also supported DDSI because they believed that ‘Abdi Iley’s real intent was to eventually secede. The Kali narrative, and DDSI historical imagery, more generally, appeal to these tensions. The hope of eventual secession animated the aspirations of even some DDSI officials. One of our Ogaden informants, a high-level DDSI bureaucrat with links to ‘Abdi Iley’s top advisors, ended his lunch break at home with a moment of silence while a song about Greater Somalia played on his computer. He then returned to the office, where any public reflection of these sentiments would land him in jail.⁶⁷

In sum, collective Ogaden identity grounded in a shared history of violence and marginalization coexists with vastly different political aspirations. DDSI, famous for launching probably the largest intra-Ogaden conflict

63. Field notes, Jigjiga, 2 July 2018.

64. Interview, Jigjiga, 25 June 2018.

65. Interview, Jigjiga, 15 June 2022.

66. Simon Harrison, *The mask of war: Violence, ritual and the self in Melanesia* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1993), p. 18.

67. Field notes, Jigjiga, 29 December 2017.

in recorded history, was aware of this. As the Liyu Police pursued counterinsurgency against fellow Ogadenis in the ONLF, it was impossible to maintain a fiction of shared Ogaden support either for Ethiopianization or for secession. Led by Ogadenis, DDSI violently put down the ONLF rebellion, killing and jailing thousands of actual or suspected ONLF supporters. By 2012, Jijjiga's jail was known as 'Jail Ogaden' in recognition of its inhabitants. In order to legitimize their violence against their fellow Ogadenis, DDSI elites also worked to disrupt the idea of shared Ogaden political identity, extending revisionist discourse into subclan and lineage histories.

Segmentary lineage as revisionist discourse

A present-day debate illuminates how clanship's political significance is contested and refashioned by various actors. In June 2022, nearly 4 years after DDSI's collapse, several young men in Jijjiga debated whether DDSI was an Ogaden government, a Rer 'Abdille government, or a government dominated by President 'Abdi Iley's subclan, the Rer 'Ali Yusuf. Such popular debates were prevalent during DDSI rule and remain potent today as a point of comparison with the present-day administration of Mustafa 'Agjar' Moḥamed 'Umar. Non-Ogadenis sometimes described DDSI as an Ogaden government. However, Ogadenis frequently point DDSI's violence against Ogadenis. This sometimes supported the assertion that it was a Rer 'Abdille government. Nevertheless, members of Rer 'Abdille subclans observed that Rer 'Abdille were also among staunch opponents to DDSI and featured in the leadership of ONLF and other opposition movements.

Categories deployed in such debates are not neutral. As noted earlier, Rer 'Abdille seems to have been rarely invoked between 1900 and 1950. In the words of a Tolomoge informant, Rer 'Abdille was a seldom-used level of Ogaden membership until it was 'politically revitalized' by DDSI.⁶⁸ This political revitalization was strategic: it conceptually placed 'Abdi Iley's subclan, the Rer 'Ali Yusuf, in alliance with larger and more geographically dispersed lineages, including the Warfa, Amadin, Malingur, Ugas Koshin, and Ugas Nur. Yet there was nothing natural, smooth, or mechanistic about this political shift from one level of lineage organization to another. Neither did the discursive construction of Rer 'Abdille as a political identity work to categorically exclude marginalized groups like the Rer Isaq from DDSI governance. While claims about clan loyalty provided protection to members of some groups and delegitimized others, these claims had little to do with the observed political unity of the groups involved. As

68. Telephone interview, 10 November 2022.

If it fails to reflect the ‘real’ composition of political movements, clan-talk nevertheless shapes people’s possibilities of political affiliation, protection, and vulnerability in very real ways. Here again, DDSI discourse evinced a multivocal character that, in a roundabout way, invited ‘good’ Rer Isaq to support DDSI. The article quoted earlier, for example, follows its evisceration of the Rer Isaq with a nod to ‘youth born into the Rer Isaq community who were martyred’ at the hands of the ONLF. This multivalence was characteristic of DDSI discourse and practice. Despite the negative branding in public discourse, Rer Isaq individuals could be found among Jigjiga’s political elites (e.g. the mayor of Jigjiga in 2018) and wealthy businesspeople (including diaspora investors). In this regard, clan-talk appeared to play a disciplinary role: unlike in contexts of wholesale ethnic violence or genocide, the discourse and the associated historical revisionism did not, in fact, result in the categorical exclusion of Rer Isaq or similarly delegitimized groups from politics. It did, however, place them in a position of reliance on government elites to vouch for individuals as exceptions to stereotypes.

The flip side of this delegitimization would seem to be a degree of protection for Rer ‘Abdille, but such protection was neither automatic nor stable. While DDSI worked to revitalize Rer ‘Abdille identity, prominent Rer ‘Abdille individuals spanned the gamut from DDSI supporters to al-Shabaab leaders like Hassan al-Turki, opposition members, and ONLF fighters (including cousins of high-level DDSI officials). Although DDSI elites worked to protect and direct resources to their extended families, Rer ‘Abdille identity or even subclan membership guaranteed virtually nothing in terms of protection or resources. Assertions of Rer ‘Abdille identity were most relevant as claims to government affiliation directed towards non-Rer ‘Abdille. Warsame, the pro-secession businessman, recounted how, when he first returned to SRS from abroad, acquaintances inquired about his lineage. ‘I told them I was Rer ‘Abdille. Some of them got visibly upset One told me, “There’s no need to beat your chest and tell us you’re better than us”’.⁷⁴ In contrast, identifying with subclans like Malingur or Rer Warfa was politically neutral. This exemplifies how some lineage identities are popularly understood not as a cause of political affiliation but as a result of efforts to politicize kinship.

Segmentary clan-talk and the struggle over Ethiopianization

I. M. Lewis suggested that political cohesion was more likely at smaller subclan units, especially the *jilib*, the kinship group whose members share responsibility for mutual material support.⁷⁵ These shared responsibilities

74. Interview, Jigjiga, 15 May 2018.

75. Lewis, ‘A modern history’, p. 11.

traditionally include paying for the marriages of *jilib* members, as well as paying compensation or ‘blood money’ when a member kills someone from another lineage. Family networks certainly played a crucial role in DDSI politics and administration. It is possible that a systematic study of how these material relationships relate to contemporary politics might reveal effects on shared political mobilization more broadly. However, we can readily find examples in our data of *jilib* members whose political loyalties diverge. It is possible that material responsibilities associated with kinship had a stronger tendency to direct political affiliations at the time of Lewis’s writing when regional conflicts were characterized by inter-clan raiding among groups where perpetrators and victims could be readily identified. Whether they have a bearing on conflicts that have tended towards larger-scale and more anonymous confrontations between government and rebel forces is an important question.

What we can show is that even subclan identities and extended family relationships are subject to historical refashioning amid present-day struggles over the leadership of Somalis in Ethiopia. Indeed, a key concern of Galaal’s book, the DDSI-published history that describes the Kali Conference, is to craft a narrative about ‘Abdi Iley’s subclan, the Rer ‘Ali Yusuf. It describes ‘Ali Yusuf as the son of Somali lineage leader Yusuf Maḥad-Roob ‘Abdille and a non-Somali wife from Harar, in the nearby eastern Ethiopian highlands.⁷⁶ Whatever the truth of the narrative, it evinces the same revisionist bent of the Kali story by placing present-day connections and alliances back into the past. On one level, the narrative about Rer ‘Ali Yusuf maternal connections to Ethiopia legitimizes DDSI’s reliance on non-Somalis for their political power. By connecting Rer ‘Abdille through kinship to non-Somalis in the nearby Ethiopian highlands, the narrative invites the broader coalition to uphold their ancestors’ alliance.

On another level, though, the narrative also offers potentially subversive alternative readings. It could be seen as a claim about constraints on ‘Abdi Iley’s political decision-making. The Rer ‘Ali Yusuf’s position between Somalis and non-Somali elites was—in the narrative as in the reality of the present-day federalism—not of their own choosing. In a subversive reading, then, the story acknowledges that neither ‘Abdi Iley nor his subclan held ‘real’ power. Perhaps unwittingly, the narrative partakes of the broader idiom of kinship by which Somalis alternatively legitimize or delegitimize their leaders: ‘Abdi’s ‘real’ ancestors, some disaffected Jigjigans said, are Tigrayans of the TPLF.

The discursive deployment of kinship as an idiom through which to collapse time and reinterpret political loyalties has a lighter side as well as a darker one when it comes to Somalis’ future in Ethiopia. On the one hand,

76. Galaal, ‘Jalleeco’, p. 31.

clanship's conceptual reach and flexibility offer the potential for rethinking relatedness and promoting common cause with non-Somalis. In 2019, Warsame laughed at how elderly Somalis interpreted shifts in Ethiopian federal politics: many Somalis regarded Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed as another non-Somali who was unlikely to take a direct interest in Somalis' equality in Ethiopia. But when Abiy did something good, Warsame reflected, 'all the old men will talk about how his father was a Muslim, and his mother was some percent Somali, and they'll say, "He's one of us!"'.⁷⁷ On the other hand, the link between DDSI's push for Ethiopianization and its violent strategies of delegitimizing clans deepened divisions and likely undermined confidence in the viability of Somalis' Ethiopianization.

DDSI clan-talk that delegitimized opposition movements has haunting parallels in Siyad Barre's clan politics in the 1980s as he clung to power in Somalia.⁷⁸ 'Abdi Iley's ouster in August 2018 initiated the looting and burning of businesses in Jigjiga but did not launch a broader descent into clan conflict. After a decade of Ethiopianization combined with the manipulation of clanship, Somalis today are once again revising narratives about their history and place in Ethiopia. In a 2020 interview, Mustafa Mohamed 'Umar described 'the real challenge' in SRS as how the TPLF worked to exacerbate and rigidify Somali clan identities as part of their broader strategy of ruling through fragmenting opposition. He emphasized the need to construct narratives that promote integration.⁷⁹ Such attributions of political clanship to an external influence, rather than to some inherent features of Somali segmentary lineage, may promote unity by locating divisiveness outside the ethnic community. However, it also partakes of a broader demonization of the TPLF and sometimes even of ethnic Tigrayans that has loosely unified non-Tigrayan groups in Ethiopia but potentially bodes ill for the resolution of Ethiopia's current civil war. Revealingly, SRS elites after DDSI are looking beyond a deeply divided Ethiopia and working to position themselves as leaders of regional, social, and economic integration rather than 'Ethiopianization'.

Conclusion

We have argued that Somali clanship is not just a social structure or a set of pre-existing categories but that concepts of relatedness and their political relevance have shifted in response to changing conditions of governance. Ethiopia's authoritarian federal structure has prompted struggles over the

77. Field notes, Jigjiga, 18 October 2019.

78. Compagnon, 'Political decay in Somalia'.

79. Horn of Africa TV, 'Conversation: Mustafa M. Omer, president of the Somali Regional State, Ethiopia', 13 December 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bp_u1w_5mo&ab_channel=HornofAfricaTV> (10 November 2022).

political meanings of lineage identity as leaders work to ground their claims to authority in the popular idiom of clanship to the point of reconstructing levels of identity and associated historical narratives. Clan-talk among political elites legitimizes claims to power as well as inter-clan and inter-ethnic alliances by collapsing these alliances back to historical precedents, real or invented. It also delegitimizes entire groups, placing them in positions of dependence on political elites and, at worst, increasing the risk of violence legitimated in identity terms. This means that identity categories may be convenient descriptors of political trends, but analysts who describe politics in terms of such groups also risk partaking in the performative legitimization and delegitimization of these identity groups.

The idea of temporal collapse suggests a discursive mechanism by which political actors transmute genealogical relatedness into political mobilization. This differs importantly from the segmentary lineage paradigm of clan politics that retains traction in some circles. Following critics of segmentary lineage theory, we have shown how the idea of segmentary lineage has enabled governments, colonial and present-day, to justify policies targeting groups based on lineage connections, reproducing group-based violence while blaming this violence on inherent tendencies of the groups. Such clan-talk may involve historical invention regarding the subjective meanings of lineage identities: clanship is not only about present-day kinship responsibilities but also about constructing meaning through shared history. Yet clanship also constrains political invention because it is not simply a cultural construct but a potent material, economic, and psychological structure of belonging.

While it may be true on a general level in Somali politics that, as Mohamed Haji Ingiriis argues, 'clan never loses its relevance and reality',⁸⁰ the nature and substance of clanship as something beyond kinship—as a mechanism of political mobilization and legitimation—has evidently changed through manipulation and reinterpretation. Kin-based patronage networks involving individuals with shared clan identities surely exist among Somalis, as they do elsewhere. Nevertheless, even small subclan units comprise individuals with different political loyalties. It is revealing of clanship's conceptual power that this reality has not prompted a general abandonment of segmentary lineage discourse as a political explanation but rather a recasting and reinterpretation of segmentary links. More detailed study and critique of the mechanisms by which kinship translates or fails to translate into political mobilization offer a potential path forward.

A focus on temporal collapse also foregrounds the connections and disjunctures between present-day struggles for Ethiopian citizenship and the

80. Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, 'From pre-colonial past to the post-colonial present', p. 69.

identity politics of late colonialism. In the case of Ogaden history, governance strategies of targeted marginalization and violence have continued and even deepened over time. The fact that the moment of colonial liberation in the 1940s, as well as the violence of the 1960s–1980s, offers such potent parallels for interpreting the present indicates how many Somalis still perceive Ethiopian governance as effectively colonial. In this view, federalism appears akin to colonial ‘divide-and-rule’ strategies where identity categories have long been a means of fragmenting opposition.⁸¹ Governing elites from the colonial period onward have worked to shore up their power and alliances through clan-talk. Understanding how this clan-talk has functioned to imbue identities with political significance points to the need for understanding how history continues to insert itself into the present, to be sure. It also points to the need for talking about clan and ethnic politics in ways that problematize ideas like ‘historical animosities’ that redirect politics into an obsession with the past. Amid its present tumult, Ethiopia is likely to see continued efforts to revise group histories, especially in areas such as SRS, where people are still struggling intensely to assert their political agency and to make sense of their potential futures. What would it mean to rethink histories that could foreground more open possibilities of agency and alliance rather than division and marginalization?

81. Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996).