

Territorializing Ethnicity in Kenya and Ethiopia

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The idea of the nation state has penetrated the colonial and postcolonial organisation of statehood in Kenya and Ethiopia deeply at a level much below the “nation” state (a debatable entity in Africa and elsewhere). The colonial perception of “tribes” led to an administrative order in which districts and grazing reserves were delineated according to “tribal” boundaries which often were thought to be pre-existing but in reality were created in the process. Ethnicity in that process was not invented (as has been claimed for other parts of Africa) but it has changed: it has acquired a territorial character which it did not have in this form before. Ideas of group rights to parcels of the land (the miniature version of the modern territorial nation state) in the mind of policy makers combined with ideas of preservation of the range which, as modern range ecology has found not so recently, were misconceived. These ideas led to policies that restricted the range of movement of pastoral nomads. The paper draws a line from colonial policies to modern politics, in which territorial subdivision of administrative units and the restriction of nomadic movements continue. A number of reasons for this are explored. These reasons are found to be guided by the interests of self-styled elites and not by the interests of the pastoralists who are adversely affected by them.