In the early twentieth century, the southern Ethiopian and northern Kenyan frontier was subject to various types of banditry (Mburu 1999:101). The bandits comprised elephant hunters, slavers, robbers and administrators, both semi-official and official, who combined robbing with forced extraction of taxes from the frontier communities. The groups known under the general term *shifta* (pl. *shiftenant*) had traditionally been located on the periphery of the Ethiopian political landscape. They used banditry to seek advancement and recognition in the social hierarchy. Fernyhough (1994) calls them “Christian highlanders” who produced brigands along the border. The frontier environment provided them with a buffer zone with a varied ecology, sources of permanent water and proximity to transfrontier communities (Dutton 1946:131). On the southern frontier, the focus was on the bandits commonly known as *Tigre* (the local people corrupted the name as *kittiire*).

This chapter shows how an examination of the phenomenon of *Tigre* banditry contributes to a better understanding of social banditry, particularly with respect to their operational goals and their relations with the frontier states and transfrontier nomads. It investigates the extent to which Ethiopian official and nonofficial relations with the frontier bandits varied from mutual collaboration to the repudiation of their activities at other times. Further, it explores British relations with frontier banditry, including truce arrangements that sometimes resulted in conflict between Ethiopian and British administrations and at other times led to aggressive military actions against the bandits. Here I analyze the extent to which *Tigre* bandits can be categorized as social bandits when they are part of the legacies of imperial conquest.

Fernyhough (1994) argues convincingly that feudal bandits in Ethiopia reflected the social structure, functions and stresses of the time. They operated within the context of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century Ethiopian empire, and reflected ‘different types of social behavior ranging from highway robbery to extortion and kidnapping.’ If we use Hobsbawn’s (1969) ‘social banditry’ category, the causes of banditry in
Ethiopia stem from poverty and civil war (Parkyns 1966 [1853]). The rise of frontier banditry coincided with the establishment of imperial frontiers, leading to much lawlessness on the periphery, and Hobsbawm’s term ‘feudal anarchy’ might apply to their activities (Crummey 1986:135). Rey (1923:186) describes the extreme periphery in the lowlands as the ‘resort of fugitive criminals...who [lived] by robbery and pillage.’ Their activities on the frontier included organized raids into British territory, where they poached elephants, stole livestock and kidnapped people for ransom. Like other nineteenth-century bandits with special identities and aliases (e.g. Bankoff 1998:323), these bandits were linked to influential individuals from whom they took their names. Their nicknames were derived from their personalized horses or from the areas where they operated. There were the bandits of Abba Nyencha (the lion man) (Roberts 1986:66), Abba Wayaama (the father of the red earth), Abba Bokaa (the father of the rain), and so on. Crummey (1986:1) argues that such names are metaphorical, but also have social functions: they depict the leading bandits as those who, under cover of darkness, overthrew the...legal system and political order.’

The availability of firearms led to banditry becoming a popular pursuit. Shifttenant activities were linked to local commerce. For example, they sold the livestock they had seized at local markets, using traders as their agents in the transactions (Crummey 1986:159, 160). The bandits obviously acquired wealth through their activities, suggesting that their motives were more economic than political. Fernythough (1986:159) considers the Ethiopian banditry to be both 'primitive and more sophisticated', dichotomies that reflect the varied causes, objectives and types of organization of the Ethiopian shifttenant. The ‘primitivism’ referred to is association with the feudal system and internal political intrigues and conflicts, while the ‘sophistication’ relates to the use of banditry as a means of upward social mobility.

In the case of the southern frontier, the relationship between the Ethiopian bandits and the frontier nomads was one of coercion, rather than willing cooperation. Indeed, the whole purpose of such banditry was short-term. Had it been long-term, one would expect the association between the two groups to yield more results that are positive with the emergence of Robin Hood-type bandits. Yet, even when the bandits appeared to be protecting frontier pastoralists from predatory state officials, their main purpose was the preservation of their assumed fiefdom. Their recruits came from the historical habash highlander groups that shared the cultural values of Orthodox Christianity, as opposed to frontier