The Shifta Conflict, 1963–68

In 1960s northern Kenya, the individuals that became *shifta* combined militant secessionists with a nationalist agenda and more narrowly-based groups that sought personal or communal aggrandizement, through access to firearms that being *shifta* provided. Conflict in northern Kenya between 1963 and 1968 was therefore characterized by an interweaving of nationalist insurgency activity and local level conflicts over water, land, and other resources. Through the work of historians such as Nene Mburu and John Markakis, we already have an understanding of the first strand of the violence. *Shifta* insurgents carried out limited attacks on government installations, assassinated hostile officials, and conducted acts of sabotage.\(^1\) This reconstruction of the conflict builds upon these works by incorporating a discussion of some of the local dimensions of the conflict, which were intimately connected but distinct from the *shifta* campaign to liberate the NFD.

Understanding the socioeconomic dynamics of violence during the *shifta* conflict is important because it feeds into debates about the relationship between violence and Somali society, especially the role of the Somali clan structure in explaining political disintegration and civil war. For example, following the collapse of the Said Barre regime in Somalia in 1991, Lewis described Somalia’s descent into civil war as Somalis “doing what they have always done – only with greater access to more lethal weapons.”\(^2\) The implication being that modern day violence in Somali society is a consequence of ‘traditional hatreds’ rooted within the clan structure.

To a certain extent there can be no denying the importance of lineage and clan as part of every day action and identity for the Somali. For example, in relation to clan cleansing in southern Somalia during 1991 and 1992, Lidwien Kapteijns argues that politico-military leaders “not only [made] civilians the target of violence on the basis of their clan background, but also rallied them in the name of clan to become perpetrators of such violence.”\(^3\) Throughout this chapter we will also see how competing clan groups engaged in violence


against each other, and how clan affiliations impacted upon wider political loyalties. Others, such as Ahmed I. Samatar have understood Somalia’s instability as a consequence of the transformation of Somali society from clan based to class based over the course of the twentieth century, and Lee Cassanelli and Catherine Besteman root the collapse of the Somali state in the politics of resource use, and in the political economy of class, regional dynamics, and race. While it is not the intention of this chapter to enter into these debates explicitly, what it does show is that although the expression of conflict may have fallen along clan lines, much of the ‘local’ violence of the shifta conflict was rooted in long-standing struggles over power and resources.

The NFD Liberation Campaign

A detailed analysis of the shifta as a credible guerrilla insurgency movement has been made elsewhere. The discussion below is not intended to make any judgement of how the shifta operated logistically, or its internal organisation on the battlefield. Nor does the chapter consider why the Kenyan government was eventually able to overcome the rebels in late 1967. Rather the discussion is intended to provide a general illustration of the types of engagements that occurred between the shifta; here a specific reference to those engaged in a nationalist insurgency, and the Kenyan military. It also highlights the various forms of violence that were experienced by both combatants and the civilian population.

General civil disobedience in the NFD, which was characterised by protest and demonstration, the refusal to pay taxes, and the boycott of electoral politics, escalated into acts of sabotage, assassination, and abduction after June


5 See Mburu, Bandits on the Border.

6 These issues have been dealt with by Nene Mburu and are discussed in Adar, Kenyan Foreign Policy. The subject will, nonetheless, be addressed in more detail in Chapter 7.

7 We return to the opportunistic element of shifta in the second section of the chapter.