



# From Shifta to Terrorist: A Shifting Narrative Of Northern Kenya

By Salah Abdi Sheikh



As Kenya was celebrating her independence in 1963, the people of the Northern Frontier District were mourning the death of their dream of self-governance under British rule. In the spring of 1962, at the Lancaster House Conference, the region's delegation had demanded self-determination for the NFD. The colonial government appointed an independent commission to look into the question and a referendum to determine the region's future was subsequently held. The results of the plebiscite were however cancelled under suspicious circumstances even though they indicated that the overwhelming majority supported self-determination. The people felt cheated, and the north exploded in rebellion.

Northerners, especially those from the northeast, accuse the British colonial government of craftily handing over the region to Kenyatta. The colonialists had promised the separatists' leaders that they would delay independence for the region to facilitate the orderly transition from colonial rule to self-rule.

The British played both sides after the Northern Frontier District delegation rejected the terms of independence and demanded a different path for the district. The colonial government decided to disregard the wishes of most of the inhabitants and handed over the region to the post-independence Kenyan government. Somalia protested the move, which further complicated the north's struggle for

independence.

What had been a people's quest for self-rule became a political tussle between Kenya and Somalia. This issue has yet to be settled six decades later, and the north has become a victim of unending sabre-rattling. Kenya became independent on the 12th of December 1963 with Jomo Kenyatta as its Prime Minister. A State of Emergency was declared for the north-eastern region on the 27th of December 1963.

### **The *Shifita* war**

The rebellion that followed the declaration of independence was, to the separatists, a struggle for self-determination. To the Kenyan government, the separatists were *Shifita*, the name used to reduce the separatists and the NFD population to bandits, outlaws, thieves, criminals, and murderers.

The *Shifita* label has stuck, although the events surrounding the coining of the term have been carefully erased from the history books. The *Shifita* narrative was meant to unite the rest of Kenya against the menace of the separatists. The media effectively adopted the new term as a standard reference to the rebels. Newspaper headlines reported *shifita* attacks almost daily throughout the period of the conflict.

The "war" was mainly skirmishing between the ill-equipped ragtag army of northern rebels and the Kenya military backed by British planes and tanks. It is the population in the north that bore the brunt of the fighting. The nomads had to sustain the fighters in their midst with their meagre resources while dodging the military operations and bombings.

The conflict began on the 22nd of November 1963 when NFD rebels burnt down a camp in Garissa. The rebellion took its toll on the inhabitants, forcing them to flee in droves to the neighbouring countries of Somalia and Ethiopia. Kenyan security forces considered everyone a rebel and the *Shifita* label was liberally applied without discrimination to men and boys from the region. Villagisation and shooting of camel herds were used extensively by the government to force the nomadic pastoralists to settle.

### **Somalia's support**

The secessionists expected to receive arms and ammunitions from Somalia, but Somalia's loud noises were more bark than a bite. Nothing of material import came from Somalia in the four years of the war.

While fanning the conflict through declarations and radio broadcasts, Somalia was unwilling to train, arm and fight alongside the secessionists. The significant material support provided to the Kenya government by the British and the superior training of the military forces eventually turned the tide of the war in Kenya's favour.

The end of the war began in 1966 with the exodus of the nomadic population. By 1967, the secessionists were out of arms and had no resources to rely on as the nomads crossed the border into Somalia in droves in what is known as John *kacarar* (escaping John). The secessionists surrendered in groups throughout 1967.

Realising that the rebels were at the end of their tether, Somalia accepted peace terms with Kenya mediated by Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda. An agreement to end their differences and restore diplomatic relations was signed on the 14th of September 1967. The secessionist war effectively ended without any agreement with the secessionists themselves, without demobilisation, without any concession to the suffering population of the north and on terms that were never declared public to

the residents of the NFD. Four years of bombings, shootings and plunder had left the northeastern region — where the fighting was concentrated — destitute.

Once the war was over, reconstruction failed to begin. The schism remained in place. The military went on with operations aimed at clearing the region of “*shifita* elements”. The cost of the war was never enumerated. The hopelessness that descended on a defeated community required leadership, which never came.

### **Collective punishment**

A new narrative of bandits roaming in the unsafe wild north began to take shape. Collective punishment was the *modus operandi* during this period. Whenever armed criminals committed a crime, the nearest settlements were decimated by the soldiers.

In the late 1970s, an incident occurred along the Kenya-Ethiopia border where a military vehicle was burnt. The locals claimed the action was perpetrated by armed Ethiopian militia. In what came to be known as the Malka Mari Massacre, the Kenyan military detained over two hundred men and stoned them to death. None of the men was armed, and the military did not fire a shot.

In the period that followed, poaching became rampant as the stockpiles of small arms fell into the hands of poachers. Overnight, the “Somali Poacher” was born. The parks were now under threat from a new breed of armed men motivated by nothing more than money, and allegedly backed by influential people close to the government. Throughout the 1970s, the Somali poacher terrorised Kenyan elephants, rhinos, and cheetahs.

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In 1980, the security forces burned down Garissa after detaining and killing many of its inhabitants. This was an incident directly resulting from a disagreement between poachers and their contacts in government. A disgruntled poacher took matters into his own hands and killed several soldiers and other government officials.

The 1980s also saw the infamous Wagalla Massacre of 1984, where thousands were tortured and killed at an airstrip in Wajir, ostensibly during a military operation to curb banditry.

While *Shifita* and poachers were the competing narratives used by the government to explain its inability to bring the northern region under proper government control, the region suffered wanton neglect and underdevelopment.

The Somali-Ethiopia war ended in 1978, sparking the return of thousands who had fled the region during the war of secession as Somalia descended into clannism and corruption under military dictatorship. That same year, Vice-President Daniel Arap Moi gave a speech that sparked the alien debate when he threatened that the government would register all Somalis and deport anyone found to have allegiance to Somalia. It took 11 years for this policy to be implemented.

But the alienation of Somalis had begun earlier as it is recorded that police had raided Eastleigh and arrested Somali foreigners as early as 1970. Traders from the north-east were deemed vagrants and deported from areas in the Rift Valley and Central Kenya back to their home region.

Citizenship documents were tightly controlled, and a system of verification was put in place to make it impossible for the region's inhabitants to register as citizens. The police were given orders to stop and ask for IDs from anyone looking like a Cushite, a Somali or other related tribes who were distinctively identifiable.

### **The pink card**

In 1989, the famous Kenya-Somali verification and registration took place. The system was designed to catch anyone who could not be linked to a sub-location and known clan.

People had to state their family tree up to their sub-clans, and a pink card with these details was issued to the successful ones. The system was designed to force out of Kenya those unaffiliated to any of the groups "indigenous" to the country.

It is estimated that at one point hundreds were crossing the border into neighbouring countries daily. People were detained, women with young children appeared in court accused of being in the country illegally. Suspected aliens were loaded on military lorries and dropped off in Liboi across the Kenya-Somali border. Many families, especially those elites with businesses, crossed into Uganda and left for Europe or America. The pink cards eventually became available for a fee, and it is believed registration officials took hefty bribes in the process. The verification and registration were suspended after two harrowing years during which homes were raided, their inhabitants detained, and property was lost when entire families were deported with nothing more than the clothes on their backs.

As the "aliens" narrative waxed and waned, a new event triggered the updating of the terminology.

In 1991, the Somalia government of Siad Barre collapsed, spilling hundreds of thousands of refugees into the neighbouring countries. Kenya was grappling with its fear of Somalis and now had to face the eventuality of hosting desperate refugees, including the deposed president.

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The refugees were allowed in and settled in camps where they were fed and housed by the UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies. Throughout the 1990s, Somalia was controlled by warlords who divided the country into green zones, fought viciously among themselves and continued to spill out new refugees.

Apart from participating in efforts at reconciliation and in hosting refugees and facilitating their resettlement in Europe and America, Kenya stayed out of Somalia's affairs. As the refugees were too many to be housed in the sprawling camps in Dadaab, Dagahaley and Kakuma, some ended up living in towns with the alien cards issued by the UNHCR as identification.

The idea of controlling the movement of refugees soon became fashionable. For the security forces it is difficult to differentiate between locals and refugees and soldiers engaged in random stop-and-searches and nighttime raids in the main towns to flush out illegal aliens.

### **Human trafficking**

The controls placed on refugees living in towns illegally sparked lucrative human trafficking where the police and traffickers facilitated the movement of people from the Somali border to the interior.

IDs and passports became available for those who could pay but were impossible to acquire for genuine inhabitants of northern Kenya.

While Somalis and their Cushite cousins were getting used to the “alien” idea, a new term landed on Kenya’s shores: terrorism. International terrorists bombed the American embassy in Kenya in 1998. The perpetrators had names similar to those of the northerners and the refugees. The “terrorist” label did not stick for another decade and during this period Somali businesspeople invested heavily in the Eastleigh suburb of Nairobi, creating a vibrant market where initially had been an unremarkable residential estate with a few wholesale and retail shops.

This economic boom coincided with the emergence of piracy on the Somali shores of the Indian Ocean. Suddenly the Kenyan media were reporting that piracy money was flooding the markets and making life costly for the residents. The Somali pirates were real, but this was part of international piracy having its operations on the lawless Somali coast. How the piracy money was siphoned into Kenya was never explained. The piracy issue occasionally crops up when overzealous reporters make disparaging references to piracy and the real estate boom in Kenya.

### **Al Shabaab**

In 2011 Kenya sent troops into Somalia in an operation dubbed “*Linda Nchi*” after a tourist was kidnapped at the coast and probably taken across the border. There were other cross-border raids. However, significant Al-Shabaab attacks in Kenya began in 2012 when Kenyan forces were integrated into the forces of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). As Kenya became embroiled in state-building in Somalia, with the creation of Jubaland floated as the reason for the invasion, Al-Shabaab started bringing its terrorism into Kenya.

In 2013, the Westgate Mall shootings led to the death of 67 people. More than 67 others also died in attacks in Mpeketoni in Lamu in 2014. The attacks on Garissa University attack were the worst, leading to 150 dead, many of them students. These brazen attacks were attributed to Al-Shabaab. Although the terror group had already internationalised and was recruiting with no regard to ethnicity, Kenyan Somalis became the target for blame, name-calling, and arrests.

In 2013, Human Rights Watch released a report titled “You are all terrorists”. The terrorist narrative drives xenophobia, arbitrary arrests, detention, and torture. After the terror attacks in 2014 in Eastleigh and Mpeketoni, the security forces conducted an indiscriminate door-to-door operation targeting anyone who did not have an ID card to hand. This security operation was dubbed *Usalama Watch*. Those who did not have the document were taken to Kasarani Stadium and held there for two weeks. About 900 people were taken to the stadium, the majority being young people who could not acquire IDs due to discriminatory bureaucratic procedures, and a haphazard and corrupt system that barred genuine citizens from receiving the document.

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Over half a century of negative portrayals of people from the north means that the official government policy is skewed when it applies to them. The acquisition of a passport is generally a straightforward process. To ensure that aliens from the north do not acquire this critical document, the immigration department and security agencies have an illegal and discriminatory step in place for border communities — vetting. It is not enough that a northerner provides sufficient genuine documentation. The applicant must appear before a group of government officials, security officers and appointed individuals to prove their citizenship. To pass this step, one must know their location

chief, the genealogy of ones' clan and other trivialities that are ordinarily unnecessary in life.

The emergence of one label does not lead to the dropping of the existing labels. *Shifita*, Poacher, Refugee, Pirate and Terrorist shape the thinking behind public actions. These negative portrayals have an impact on how national matters are debated and resolved.

A section of Kenyan citizens is considered as dangerous to the main body of the country. The secession war that ostensibly ended in 1967 is still being fought; the terms of the agreement that ended the war have never been the subject of a national conversation. Did the agreement include such important matters as citizenship, identity, development, and non-discrimination? The security agencies have not discarded their belligerent attitude towards the population and the civil service retains the policies of the 1960s towards the people of the north.

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National identity is at stake as those who rejected becoming part of Kenya at independence cannot have equal status with everyone else. They are aliens, and "they all look like". The most dangerous portrayal is the association with terrorism; poachers and pirates are small fish compared to terrorists. In the last few years, enforced disappearances and extra-judicial killings related to the war on terror have become commonplace. It is hard to fight for the rights of one who is labelled a terrorist and is disappeared or killed.

Public association with a terror suspect is a stigma that nobody is willing to be associated with. Crimes are committed under cover of fighting terrorism, and there is nothing the targeted community can do about it. That is the power of a label; it obscures the truth, gives authorities cover to commit genocidal crimes and permits the practice of xenophobia in public.

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