



# The road to Kenya?: Visions, expectations and anxieties around new infrastructure development in Northern Kenya

Hassan H. Kochore

To cite this article: Hassan H. Kochore (2016) The road to Kenya?: Visions, expectations and anxieties around new infrastructure development in Northern Kenya, Journal of Eastern African Studies, 10:3, 494-510, DOI: [10.1080/17531055.2016.1266198](https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2016.1266198)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2016.1266198>



© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 27 Dec 2016.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 827



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



Citing articles: 17 [View citing articles](#)

## The road to Kenya?: Visions, expectations and anxieties around new infrastructure development in Northern Kenya

Hassan H. Kochore

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale), Germany

### ABSTRACT

A fundamental change is taking place in the physical, economic and political landscape of Kenya. The northern territory, previously excluded from national development, has in recent years been thrust into the centre of national development planning. The Kenya Vision 2030 blueprint has been a key force in these changes, as it identifies certain flagship development projects that are thought to have the power to re-make the Kenyan nation. This paper takes the case study of the under-construction Isiolo-Moyale road, a key project of Kenya Vision 2030, as a lens through which to understand how these projects are being perceived, received and contested on the ground in Marsabit County. It argues that there are multiple and sometimes contradictory interpretations, understandings and expectations both by the state and by the people of Marsabit of the changes brought about by the recent infrastructure development in the area.

### ARTICLE HISTORY


Received 12 May 2016

Accepted 24 November 2016

### KEYWORDS

Vision 2030; Northern Kenya; modernity; infrastructure; enchantment; identity

Transport infrastructure generally and roads in particular have long been thought of as mundane technical objects that connect people and places. Recent literature has identified how infrastructures are much more than this: here roads are seen as having the capacity to ‘enchant’ – ‘to produce a generalised sense of social good’.<sup>1</sup> They have been held up as an ‘archetypal technology of post-enlightenment, emancipatory modernity’<sup>2</sup> and as objects which ‘represent the possibility of being modern, of having a future’.<sup>3</sup> In these approaches, roads, which are thought to facilitate free movement and circulation, are seen as encapsulating certain values, promising emancipation, development and progress. They conjure particular imaginary landscapes of remote places and people who will be brought development, and of centres of power that are in a position to bring that development. Roads are also seen as tools for national integration. In the discourses of planning documents, roads are the means through which the excluded will be included, and will be able to enjoy the services and security offered by the state. In academic discourses, roads enable people and regions to be made ‘legible’ to the state to facilitate the exercise of government,<sup>4</sup> and facilitate the ‘broadcasting’ of state power.<sup>5</sup> In other words, as technologies that lead from capital cities to the regions, they are seen to have the power to bring development, progress, national inclusion and security.

**CONTACT** Hassan H. Kochore  [kochore@eth.mpg.de](mailto:kochore@eth.mpg.de)

© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

This approach to roads is relevant to understanding the processes taking place in Kenya. Kenya's national development plan, Kenya Vision 2030, gives a prominent role to infrastructures like roads, railways and pipelines as connecting regions to the centre and bringing development and transformation. In Kenya Vision 2030, infrastructure is a way of fundamentally altering not only the development opportunities for its northern populations but also their identities. The vision is articulated through and premised on the rhetoric of opening up remote areas and regions previously neglected or closed off from the nation to new economic opportunities.<sup>6</sup> The document forecasts boldly that 'by 2030, it will become impossible to refer to any region of our country as remote'.<sup>7</sup> The special annex to the blueprint named, *Kenya Vision 2030 for Northern Kenya and other arid lands*, also ambitiously envisages 'turn[ing] history on its head' by fully integrating the north into 'the social, economic and political life of Kenya'.<sup>8</sup>

The emphasis on building roads, railways and pipelines is part of unprecedented infrastructure project in post-colonial Kenya known as the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport Corridor (LAPSSET) project which encompasses building an oil pipeline, railway and highway to South Sudan and Ethiopia. In the same vein the project aims to open up northern and coastal Kenya to Nairobi and to the wider East Africa and Horn of Africa region. The ambitions and belief in the transformative power of this project is captured in its slogan, 'Building Africa's Transformative and Game Changer Infrastructure to Deliver a Just and Prosperous Kenya.'

Through the case study of the Isiolo-Moyale road, this paper explores the road component of the (LAPSSET) project. In many ways, the road fits very well this idea of infrastructure as enchanting and transformatory. The road is part of a broader change of heart on the part of the Kenyan government towards the northern regions: here it is rolling out a development project of enormous magnitude in an area that had been, for all intents and purposes, left out of the post-colonial nation-building process. Therefore, the road has inherent symbolic and political resonance for the state and its citizens. It is also important to note that this infrastructure development is connected to the post 2010 restructuring of the Kenyan state, which has devolved power to new county governments. Clemens Greiner discusses in more detail the national versus county level dynamics through the example of Baringo County.<sup>9</sup> In this context, the road is an important part of the way in which power is territorialized and broadcast across the landscape.<sup>10</sup> The road – and all its associated metaphors and practices – becomes a form of 'state monumentality'<sup>11</sup> and a means through which the new Kenyan state is 'spatialized'.<sup>12</sup> Through the road the Kenyan state seeks to naturalize and legitimize its power and authority by connecting the centre to the regions and vice versa. In this sense roads, to borrow Verhoeven's description, are seen as the 'veins of the nation'.<sup>13</sup> The belief in infrastructure to deliver development and national integration is what Harvey and Knox have described as 'the enchantments of infrastructure'.<sup>14</sup> Through a case study of Peru, Harvey and Knox demonstrate how roads hold a central place in the imagination of the state by the people and how the state has used roads as a modernist vision of improvement and integration. Through the above conceptual framework and drawing on the literature on roads as ethnography,<sup>15</sup> this paper explores the 'enchantment' with the road, on the part of the central state, of the new county government officials, and of the residents of Marsabit County through which the road runs.

But the paper goes much further than exploring the enchantment that has accompanied the road; it also draws on historical and anthropological literature that shows that, as well

as generating desire and promise and acting as conduits of development and state power, new infrastructures generate anxieties and are the focus of contestation. I argue that a focus on the enchantment with roads occludes a study of the history that fundamentally influences the way in which the road is perceived and used. Adeline Masquelier in her widely quoted paper, 'road mythographies', argues that the road is an 'iconic space that condenses past histories'<sup>16</sup> and therefore becomes a link to the past through the sedimentation of collective and personal histories and serves as 'a map that supports social memory'.<sup>17</sup> Jan Vansina has also described roads in similar terms: as being 'history carved in the landscape'.<sup>18</sup> As such, the symbols, distinctions, and stories that are associated with roads, Vansina argues, 'provide a useful window into how people use them as mnemonic devices'<sup>19</sup> through which to articulate history, understand changes and imagine the future. Anchored on this premise, the paper explores the multi-faceted responses the 'state-led' modernizing/tarmacking of the Isiolo-Moyale highway is eliciting on the ground in Marsabit County. Through this historical approach, the paper demonstrates that the new Isiolo-Marsabit road – as well as bringing development, national inclusion and security – can also engender new exclusions hence potentially undermining the state's plans and visions. By showing that there were pre-existing experiences and narratives superimposed on the same road, I generally show that roads do not just broadcast power in a unidirectional manner but can also be avenues for contesting state power; they not only enchant but also bring anxieties, and do not just bring about a sense of nationalism but can generate much more complex reactions based on pre-existing relations with the state.

The paper is organized as follows: in the first half, I introduce the road in more detail by talking about its current state juxtaposed against its past (dilapidated state). I then go on to explore how the new road is viewed by members of the new Marsabit County government as a (re-)connection to the Kenyan state in a post-decentralization context and relate this to how the residents themselves are enthusiastic about the road's inclusionary prospects. In the second half of the paper, I explore more closely the long history of the road and show that this history is largely ignored by government documents like Kenya Vision 2030 and its associated discourses. This section also reveals how the road has been appropriated for political capital by both the national and local elites by drawing on the language of exclusion and integration. Lastly, I analyse the narratives of the residents along the road to show their ambivalence to the road through the example of how they emphasise their 'non-Kenyan' forms of identity and belonging.

The paper is based on life histories and semi-structured interviews with residents and Marsabit County government officials conducted between March and May 2014, analysis of government reports, media articles and archival material. Other materials are also drawn upon, notably songs which I collected as part of this research, particularly political campaign songs that praised different politicians for their roles in lobbying the government for the tarmacking of the road. The interviews were carried out in Marsabit town, and also in two settlements on the Isiolo-Moyale road. The first is Manyatta Jillo, a small settlement located on Marsabit mountain, not far along the tarmac from Marsabit town. The second is the small town of Bubisa, some 50 km North of Marsabit, and the first trading centre on the new Marsabit – Moyale road. Manyatta Jillo is near to Marsabit town, and its higher altitude allows households to practise agriculture as well as keeping livestock. Bubisa is in the lowlands and is a dry and dusty place. Although many

households have connections to Marsabit town for work and trade, they mostly rely on camel pastoralism.

### The Isiolo-Moyale road then and now

Out here, trips are measured by time, not by distance.<sup>20</sup>

The 526 km road from Isiolo to Moyale is part of the Great North Road that leads from Cairo to Cape Town and runs through the North of Kenya, connecting Kenya and Ethiopia. Colonial administrators, locals, visitors and motorists to the region have long highlighted the dilapidated state of this road and infrastructure more generally. In 1963, Alys Reece, the wife of Gerald Reece, a long time administrator in Northern Kenya, in her memoir, *To My Wife: Fifty Camels*, wrote this about her husband's travel in the North:

His mileage was astronomical, and his transport seems to have been feeling it, for there are references in his diary about breakdowns of all sorts, from the usual burst tyres or cracked wheels and petrol tanks, fan belt trouble, lorries turning over and so on, as well as the inevitable stuck in the mud. There are numerous references to digging out of mud other people whom he had encountered on his travels.<sup>21</sup>

This has been more or less the situation on the Marsabit-Isiolo road until recently (Figure 1). Travelling along the road called for a lot of patience, energy and money. The road used to be mainly plied by huge trucks as they are the only ones suited to the otherwise unmotorable terrain. From Marsabit southwards, the lorries carried cattle or goats and sheep. People travelled perched on top of these trucks enduring the blistering sun and dodging thorny branches of trees jutting out onto the road.



**Figure 1.** Anthropologist Paul Baxter's Car stuck in the mud somewhere between Marsabit and Moyale. Circa. 1952. Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. Accession no.: 2008.2.2.565.

Its current state makes it hard to believe that it is the same road (Figure 2). Since 2007, the tarmacking of the road has transformed it into a wide ‘international standards’ highway cutting into the previously sandy, loose and dusty landscape. The ubiquity of Nissan *matatus* and small saloon cars along this highway evokes a feeling of out-of-placeness of these smaller vehicles for those who experienced the vagaries of travelling along this road on the gigantic ‘gallant warriors of the north’<sup>22</sup> (the lorries). Some of the centres, like Merille, that used to be stopping places for food and drinks and ‘news of the road’ look deserted; their lonely structures painted with Coca-Cola adverts are the only reminder of their indispensability once upon a time.

For most of the journey, it is these memories and the new experience on the tarmac road that animate discussions of development, change and future possibilities: ‘Kenya’ is now only a few hours away and so is Ethiopia on the other side. As one Marsabit County official put it to me, ‘it is liberation of sorts’.<sup>23</sup> These narratives feed into the larger image of the north being the new frontier for development<sup>24</sup> and ‘ushering new beginnings’.<sup>25</sup> The inauguration of the different road sections has been a highly publicized event by the national and local leaders. In 7 December 2015, a ‘cross-border’ peace initiative was launched in the border town of Moyale that was attended by the president of Kenya and the prime minister of Ethiopia.<sup>26</sup> The speeches of the two leaders revolved around the development of infrastructure between the two countries and self-congratulatory rhetoric of having opened up Southern Ethiopia and Northern Kenya through infrastructure development. The Marsabit County governor is also upbeat about the benefits of the new road; he suggests that, ‘This road is a major game changer in this county’.<sup>27</sup> As at mid-November 2016, the road is fully tarmacked and a grand nationalistic opening



**Figure 2.** Current image of the tarmacked Marsabit-Isiolo Highway. Photo: Author 2014.

ceremony is expected in the run up to next year's elections. More local events celebrating the road have already begun with the Marsabit County governor recently presiding over an event to celebrate the completion of the road.<sup>28</sup>

According to Kenya National Highway Authority's website,<sup>29</sup> there have been several 'immediate benefits' of the road. Travel time between Moyale (Kenya/Ethiopia border town) and Nairobi has been reduced from about three days to 10 hours. Previously, bus travellers made two, night-long stopovers during the journey from Moyale to Nairobi, the first at Marsabit and the second at Isiolo, arriving in Nairobi on the evening of the third day. Government institutions have increased their response in the delivery of public services including security. Stabilization of security among communities residing along the road has significantly increased. Inter-community conflicts have since reduced to almost nil. Commodity supply and economic trade into the region has increased, as has market access to goods and livestock produced from the region.

### **The North: never quite Kenyan**

During the colonial period, the Northern Frontier District was regarded mainly as a convenient buffer between Abyssinia and the settled areas and the native reserves of Kenya. The region was considered unprofitable, and it was thought that the population was too small to merit attention while there was so much to be done in the more densely inhabited areas of the colony.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, it was believed that the desert nature of the territory and the nomadic habits of the people rendered impracticable any close form of native administration. The north has therefore been historically relegated to the periphery of the Kenyan Nation and was treated as a thing apart. The post-colonial Kenyan state has continued to think about the north in the same terms, classifying it as 'a low potential area' in its first development plan known as Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965. Since then an undeclared War has been fought in Northern Kenya, and state violence unleashed in the area made the relationships between the communities and state deeply problematic.<sup>31</sup>

Hassan Wario Arero has discussed how the residents of Northern Kenya, and Marsabit and Moyale in particular, position themselves in regard to the Kenyan nation.<sup>32</sup> He argues that the people do not imagine themselves as being part of the nation owing to their social and political marginalization from the post-colonial Kenyan state. One fundamental part of this marginalization is that of the underdevelopment of infrastructure, particularly roads. Hence Arero points out that when they reach the tarmac road in Isiolo after enduring the long and bumpy ride on the roof of trucks, the people of Marsabit and Moyale say they had now 'reached Kenya'.

Taking Arero's paper (written when the tarmac road was a distant dream for the north) as a point of departure, the next section explores how the officials in the county government of Marsabit perceive and articulate the impact(s) the arrival of the tarmac road is having on a part hitherto cut off from the nation. Will the arrival of the tarmac in these parts mean that since Kenya is now closer and accessible people will feel more 'Kenyan'?

### **Becoming 'Kenyan'?**

No doubt Marsabit will be part of Kenya.<sup>33</sup>

Interviewing the Marsabit County officials, one finds the term ‘Vision 2030’ ubiquitous in their narrative on the County Development Plans. This position is very well captured by the county development officer who explained to me:

All our county development plans will be linked to the Kenya Vision 2030. We have medium plans that will take into account the implementation of the vision at the county level which reflects the key priority areas of the vision (2030).<sup>34</sup>

He then went on to explain how Energy and Infrastructure had been allocated the principal share of the Marsabit County government budget for the financial year 2013–2014 which was justified as a reflection of the priority position of transport infrastructure development in the Kenya Vision 2030 itself. The Kenya Vision 2030 in this case serves as a master copy from which to read ‘development’ and therefore demonstrates how the national government’s enchantment with infrastructure is reproduced at the county level.

The officials of the county government of Marsabit are therefore upbeat about the ‘development’ that the tarmacked section of the Isiolo-Moyale has brought to the area and ‘will bring in the near future’.<sup>35</sup> These benefits were very well articulated by Ali Boru, a senior official of the Marsabit County government who put it to me that, ‘People are excited; those who know the value of roads.’<sup>36</sup> He pointed out that the population of Marsabit town has increased tremendously as the journey from Isiolo to Marsabit has been significantly shortened by the tarmacking of the road; a change which has attracted many businessmen ‘from Kenya’. There is a lot of optimism that the economy of the region will grow robustly following an inflow of capital from other parts of the country. Boru added that the road is also expected to bring people more into the cash economy as

[p]eople are now ready to part with money as there are ‘*matatus*’.<sup>37</sup> [Before the tarmac] They used to beg for lifts from truck drivers; pastoralists never want to part with money but since they are enjoying the benefits of comfortable transport offered by the *matatus*, the attitude is changing drastically.<sup>38</sup>

The county government also recognizes that the roads have helped in supporting mobile schools in the area<sup>39</sup> as well as making life easier for those going to schools down country – the southern part towards Nairobi. From these discussions, therefore, the real or perceived benefits that the road has already brought to the area and the expectations of more ‘development’ are quite evident. In addition, the improvement of the road network is perceived as beneficial not only to the region but also to other parts of the country that will be connected through this network. For example, as a member of the Marsabit County Assembly put it to me:

There will be quality meat in Nairobi due to the ease in transportation. Previously, the animals used to lose weight and some become sick on the lorries on route to Nairobi. Now, Nairobi people will get value for money for the meat they purchase and the pastoralists [will also] for their livestock.<sup>40</sup>

These optimistic perspectives of the road in many ways mimic and reproduce the ‘Vision 2030’ discourse in that they portray the arrival of the road as a crucial turning point in the history of the region. The national government indexes the existence of a paved road to a region’s degree of social and economic progress<sup>41</sup>; a position effectively presented and



reproduced at the local level by the Marsabit County government. The residents to some level also engage and feed off this optimistic narrative as I explore in the next section.

### **'Dubai was like this': imagining the future**

Guyo Abbane, a former politician and currently a business operator in the desert town of Bubisa is an optimistic man to say the least. Owing to the new tarmac road coming down from Marsabit to the border town of Moyale, he feels that the small town of Bubisa in which he has lived for decades is facing imminent positive transformation. Glancing at the landscape behind his tin and timber restaurant and sipping his tea, he pensively points out: 'Dubai was like this [a desert], or even worse. Why would Chalbi not be a big city like that?'<sup>42</sup> Abudho Tuye, a young man sitting next to Guyo, adds matter of factly, 'we will have power coming from Ethiopia; transport will be cheaper; business will boom'.<sup>43</sup> The subsequent discussion with the two paints a fantastical image of the boom days to come: skyscrapers, sophisticated cars and a generally transformed skyline. These images feed very well into the residents' optimism surrounding the prospects the new road is expected to bring to the region. It is in a way an iteration of the positive digitally mastered images contained in Kenya Vision 2030, which portray the 'modernity' to come. The perception held by the people that road construction brings development and progress demonstrates how they actively engage with infrastructural development to (re-)construct relations with the state and the landscape. As one informant put to me, despite neglecting the area and its people for a long time, the government has now 'remembered'<sup>44</sup> them with development and is therefore now more visible and present.

However, while the Kenyan government is more appreciated, a different narrative is often deployed that runs counter to the government's nationalistic narrative of bringing development and bringing the people 'closer to the nation'.<sup>45</sup> The next section of the paper explores some of this local ambivalence to the development of the road premised on a historical reflection on the road itself.

### **The road, insecurity and the state: a historical perspective**

Northern Kenya has had a fraught relationship with the Kenyan state. In 1962, a year before Kenya's independence, in a referendum organized by the British government, a majority of the people of Northern Kenya (then known as the Northern Frontier District<sup>46</sup>) 'almost unanimously'<sup>47</sup> preferred secession from the Kenyan state to Somalia. The following year, however, incoming President Jomo Kenyatta's declaration that not an inch of the Kenya territory would be ceded to Somalia was followed by insurgency across Northern Kenya. The insurgents called themselves the Northern Frontier District Liberation Front (NFDLF),<sup>48</sup> although in the state's propaganda language they came to be known as *shifita* – 'bandits'. This section will highlight how this insurgency played out on the Marsabit-Isiolo road and how the *shifita* used the road to their advantage. I argue that while it has often been advanced, as discussed in the earlier part of this paper, that roads are a tool through which states ensure control and make landscapes and population more legible and controllable, the history of this particular event shows that a reliance on the road by the state military made them more vulnerable to attacks from the insurgents.

At the time of the conflict, the *shifita* launched their attacks on the road during the rainy season when the entire region was flooded. This made it easier for the guerillas to cover the area on camels as opposed to the army trucks which often got stuck in the mud. The *shifita* lined the road with land mines 'inscribed with UAR (United Arab Republic) in Arabic letters'.<sup>49</sup> The landmines blew up some of the army trucks and greatly curtailed the Kenyan military's movement along this and other roads in the region. The state's response to these road attacks was draconian: whenever landmines blew up army tankers, the communities were rounded up and punished wholesale and their livestock confiscated. For example, a provincial Police officer reported in 1967 after an attack on the road a few kilometres from Isiolo town:

I wish to record that I was grateful to know that the security forces seized another 1000 head of cattle as a result of this incident and in future such acts by *shifita* should be met with similar action.<sup>50</sup>

This background is important for this paper in the sense that the road encapsulates the history of 'road bandits' at the onset of independence with the violence and insecurity that is associated with this particular road in contemporary Northern Kenya. In the present-day, the bandits that terrorize travellers through armed robbery along this road are also known as *shifita*. According to an old informant, after the *Shifita* War ended, the remnants of the *shifita* 'took the arms they had to the road and started robbing people and hence ever since the road became synonymous with the *shifita*'.<sup>51</sup> Residents, visitors and even local prominent politicians have succumbed to the activities of *shifita* on this road.

For example, on 24 January 1982, Alex Isako Umuro, the then Marsabit North Member of Parliament was killed on the road by this modern day '*shifita*'.<sup>52</sup> More recently, on 10 January 2013, the Member of Parliament for Saku, Hussein Tarry Sasura was attacked on the road but escaped unhurt.<sup>53</sup> Four days later, a British Metropolitan Police officer on holiday, a British Somali destined for Marsabit, was killed on the road. This is how the British newspaper *The Telegraph* reported the incident:

A Metropolitan Police officer on holiday in Kenya died when the vehicle he was in was attacked and sprayed with bullets by bandits in the country's lawless north. Jamal Moghe, 26, from Wembley, was sitting next to the driver in a lorry that was carrying passengers, and was killed in the first moments of the ambush . . . Lorries are used as public transport between Archer's Post and Marsabit because of the poor state of the roads. Most passengers travel on top of goods in the back, but Mr Moghe had either paid for, or been offered the comfort of a seat in the cabin.<sup>54</sup>

As demonstrated by this incident and the subsequent reporting, the *shifita* have come to be a major hazard of the road and the road itself has become a microcosm of the general insecurity and 'state absence' from the north of the country. In January 2016, BBC Radio Four ran a documentary featured under 'Road Stories' describing the Isiolo-Moyale road as 'The road of Death and Terror'.<sup>55</sup> A story in which of course the *shifita* road bandits feature prominently albeit in a sensational manner at times.

Here, it is important to see how the insecurity of both the '*Shifita* War days' where army vehicles were blown up by landmines, and contemporary insecurity of robbery, speak to the way this particular road in some ways has undermined the authority of the government by effectively exposing its inability to curb insecurity on the road. More importantly

it challenges the argument that roads are a common means for channelling state power,<sup>56</sup> or for generating effects of ‘state monumentality’,<sup>57</sup> as these road attacks, by the *shifita* of the secessionist war era and the modern day *shifita*, have underscored how a ‘frontier’ highway has been the focal point for undermining the state.

On the other hand, the dilapidated state of the road has not only worked against the state but also against the residents of Marsabit and Moyale. The insecurity and unpleasant travel experiences of the road formed part of the daily struggle for the people. It is important therefore to understand this history in order to understand how the history of this particular road informs local contemporary reactions to plans like Kenya Vision 2030. In the next section, I will therefore explore how the residents have engaged the state through direct lobbying for the improvement of the road before, and how at present they contest the idea that the government brought the road by actively foregrounding their efforts and agency in the tarmacking of the road. The ‘Great Trek’ campaign that lobbied the government to tarmac the road particularly demonstrates how the road narrative is not a new development as the government presents in Vision 2030, but instead shows that the politics of infrastructure development has long been salient in the political and social life of the region.

## The Great Trek

In search of the tarmac, we walked on foot.<sup>58</sup>

On 7 November 2004, a historic campaign to lobby the Kenyan government to tarmac the 510 km road was launched in the border town of Moyale. The event was organized by members of Moyale and Marsabit communities and was mainly supported by the Catholic Church and other non-governmental organizations.<sup>59</sup> A group of fifty trekkers set off from Moyale’s football stadium amid a lot of fanfare and speeches from the region’s Members of Parliament. The volunteers would trek from Moyale to Isiolo as part of the activism to lobby the government to tarmac the road. While the local Members of Parliament did not participate in the organization of the event, they exploited it to score some easy political points. In their address to the residents of Moyale, the MPs launched a catalogue of criticism on the government for ‘neglecting the region’. It was telling that the MPs had been for a long period part of the government (elected on the ticket of the ruling party, KANU) and had failed to bring the same development (like tarmacking the road) for which they were criticizing the government of the day. The fact that KANU was trumped at the 2002 elections meant that at the time of the ‘Great Trek’ most of the MPs in the area had found themselves in the opposition, and hence could now conveniently point fingers ‘at the government’ for ‘neglecting Northern Kenya’. A quote from one of the area MPs at the launch of the campaign sums up their desperate position at the time, ‘I am making a special appeal to the European Union and the World Bank, to come and help us because we have been ignored by successive governments for the past 41 years.’<sup>60</sup>

This particular campaign is important for two reasons: one, which is quite straightforward, is that it captures how local politicians used this movement to generate publicity. The second is that in future it would become a reference point for some locals for when things started to get better for the region: it has come to be memorialized in the local folklore. For example, the event is invoked in local election campaigns songs

composed and sung during elections but also widely listened to afterwards. For example, in this verse from a song from 2013 election campaigns, a candidate for the position of governor of Marsabit County is praised for the support he provided to the activists in The Great Trek, by coming to meet them en route to Isiolo to give food and water:

<i>Barbath lami, nu milan yaane</i>	(in search of the tarmac, we trekked)
<i>Moyale banne, Isiolo bannnee</i>	(We left Moyale for Isiolo)
<i>Archer's in banan Abshiro garre</i>	(On reaching Archer's; we met Abshiro <sup>61</sup> )
<i>Yo bela d'ebu, nu isan banne</i>	(He quenched our thirst and satisfied our hunger)

I interviewed the composer and singer of this particular song and why it was important to draw on the Great Trek. He explained:

The songs appeal to the memory of the voters by reminding them about what the candidate has done in the absence of the government in helping the people regarding the road problem and also in lobbying the government on their behalf.<sup>62</sup>

He also pointed out that this was not the first time he had used the road in campaign songs; he had composed for different candidates. For a parliamentary candidate in the 1997 general elections praising his efforts in lobbying the government to airlift students studying 'down country' who were stuck at home after the school holidays due to heavy El-Nino rains that had rendered the road impassable. A verse from this song goes:

<i>Nulen inqabanna Bokai el nino wan gutha;</i>	(We all remember that the el-nino rains were huge)
<i>Badasson nurobbe kara nura kuta;</i>	(They [the rains] came and cut our roads)
<i>Abdin Sirkalat nuiyye, Tuyurat ijolle ten nuguraa.</i>	(Abdi [the then MP] appealed to the government and the government provided helicopters that took our children to school)

These songs not only commemorate important and emotive aspects of the history of the region and present an epic dimension to the local politics of memory, but also have inherent political potency both at the local and national level, hence underlining the enchanting force of the road. It has become a key campaign agenda not only for local but also national politics, with presidential candidates promising to tarmac the road if supported in the general elections. The opposition presidential candidate Raila Odinga on two occasions claimed credit for the start of the work of reconstructing the road – in the 2007<sup>63</sup> and 2013<sup>64</sup> election campaigns. In 2013, President Mwai Kibaki was seen inaugurating different road building projects, including the Marsabit-Moyale road,<sup>65</sup> in the area in the run up to elections.<sup>66</sup>

It is a matter of contention whether it was actually Odinga or Kibaki who initiated the construction of the road. At the local level however this seems to be mainly insignificant as, unlike plans and reports produced by the government, the residents do not necessarily perceive the road as an example of a 'development' that was delivered to the region from elsewhere – the 'powerful' centre. Instead, they narrate how they had to lobby a government that was distant and had neglected the region for it. An informant in Marsabit mentioned in an interview referring to the Great Trek: That is how we 'Isiolo, Marsabit and Moyale brought the tarmac to this region'.<sup>67</sup> In the new excitement of the transformation of this region therefore, the stories associated with the events leading to the tarmacking of the road significantly differ from and sometimes (in)advertently undermine the state's nationalist view that the state 'brought the road' through the Kenya Vision 2030 and LAPSET development plan. Using the road narrative in this way therefore helps to

reveal these multi-layered and sometimes contradictory narratives in how people make sense of themselves and their landscape in the context of development and change. The next section of this paper explores further this multi-faceted response to the road by looking at how the Marsabit Borana, based on their historical relationship with their 'home-land' in Southern Ethiopia, invoke a 'return home' metaphor which serves as a form of refuge from the fears and anxieties that have emerged in the rapidly changing frontier.

### Returning 'home'? Of the black road prophecy

Even though the future is always uncertain, the conflicts of the past are known and understood and can be recalled to make statements about the present. The prophet might be long dead but the power of the prophecy lives on.<sup>68</sup>

Many respondents in Marsabit expressed the sentiments about the benefits the road will bring as discussed in the first section of this paper. On top of the development discourse however, there is an important narrative about how the road will (re-)configure the identity and loyalty of the residents. One of the ways in which this is being articulated is through the invocation of prophecies. Prophecies, sooth saying and entrails reading have been no strangers to the region. For example, between 1940 and 1942 at the height of the Second World War as the region was caught between the Anglo-Italian war and attacks from tribes in Southern Ethiopia, there were several reports of prophets operating in the area. For example, in 1940, one District Commissioner reported that:

a local Gabra prophet has announced that the whole tribe are about to fall to the ravages of a disease unless they congregate in a high cool atmosphere (i.e. Marsabit, Kulal or the Hurri hills).<sup>69</sup>

Also in 1941 it was noted that:

A Boran soothsayer recently read the entrails of a goat. He saw peace on both sides of the frontier, but foresaw that the Marsabit Boran would be moved back to Dirre [in current day Ethiopia] and that the Rendille and Samburu would come to live on the mountain.<sup>70</sup>

It is important to note in particular the point about the Borana 'being moved back to Dirre' as going back to the homeland seems to be a commonly-evoked sentiment whenever the Borana are faced with anxieties of some kind, social or political. The analysis of prophecies in response to this particular road is therefore meant to demonstrate how 'the power of the unforeseen and of the *unfolding* ... [and] people's relentless determination to negotiate conditions of turbulence to introduce order and predictability into their lives'.<sup>71</sup> Today, a common prophecy related to the road recounted in the area both among the Borana and Gabra is one by 'prophet' Arero Bosaro. The tale has it that about two centuries ago Arero Bosaro prophesied that:

a 'black road' [tarmac] would come from the South [in the direction of what is now southern Kenya]. There will be brown roads connecting each and every household to this black road. And when that is complete, there will be problems in the area; there will be a war and the people will be decimated. The only people who will escape are those who will avoid these roads by descending into the lowlands.<sup>72</sup>

The warning offered in the prophecy was, '*kara irra fagad'a woni nam bassa bulle*'<sup>73</sup> – that is, avoid the roads; the only place that will be safe will be the vast desert (beyond the reach of

the roads). Such cataclysmic prophecies about roads have been reported elsewhere in Africa for example in Tanzania where, in reference to The Great North road, they figure that:

South Africa, which is the continent's industrial and technological powerhouse, will be supplying the weaponry that have to be shipped by this road, to the Northern frontline where the prophesied 'World War III' should be taking place during 'end' days.<sup>74</sup>

An old informant, Guyo Malicha, in underlining the potency of and the belief in prophecy said to me: 'We have seen a lot of prophecies come to pass before.'<sup>75</sup> In this prophecy by Arero Bosaro, the road is predicted to carry all the Borana in Southern Kenya (Nairobi, Mombasa and other parts of Kenya) and take them back to their homeland of Dirre and Liban in Southern Ethiopia. These 'homelands', as Hassan Arero points out, have a powerful symbolism for the Borana. As he documented among the Borana in Nairobi:

Although Ethiopia in the late 1960s and in the 1970s was a country dogged by internal difficulties particularly the drought and the political turbulence that followed the toppling of the imperial regime of Haile Selassie, the idea of one day 'going home' had, particularly to the elderly urban Boran, a powerful attraction.<sup>76</sup>

In contemporary Marsabit this 'return home' metaphor is espoused in this particular prophecy that the tarmac road connecting Northern Kenya to Southern Ethiopia will aid the return of the Borana to their homeland. With the impending opening up of Northern Kenya to Southern Ethiopia through the construction of the Isiolo-Moyale road, it seems likely that the Ethiopian connection and roots will be invoked and reinforced more at least if only to articulate the marginalization of the Kenyan Borana in the post-colonial Kenyan state and their ambivalence towards the current state, the government's integrationist rhetoric notwithstanding. Therefore, juxtaposed against the project of opening up Northern Kenya and hence bringing it closer to the nation, the narrative about the road contained in the prophecy is obviously counterproductive for the Kenyan state's 'nationalist project' of opening up the North to Kenya through infrastructural development. The likelihood of people's hearts and minds drifting elsewhere seems very likely at least for the time being.

## Conclusion

Through the lens of the Isiolo-Moyale road, this paper has attempted to provide a historical and anthropological understanding of the response to the new developments happening across Northern Kenya. The historical dimension of over half a century demonstrates how the reaction to the road by the residents is embedded in the *longue durée* of the politics of the region. During the secessionist war of the 1960s, for example, the road was used by insurgents to undermine state presence and penetration through the deployment of mine warfare. This demonstrated how roads are not only technologies of power or avenues of channelling state power as argued by Herbst<sup>77</sup> but could also be used by different groups to challenge the presence and legitimacy of the state.

The links between roads, development and the state as discussed in this paper highlights the paradigm of infrastructure as enchanting due its imagined properties of delivering development and national integration. For contemporary Kenyan politicians, the road has therefore become a source of political capital and as the paper has shown, the government and politicians at different levels engage narratives about the construction of the road in order to solicit votes and engage in discourses of national integration. This

road, then, can be viewed as a deeply political project which is a key strategy to reinvigorate nation building in Kenya. This ambition is clearly described as ‘integration’ as infrastructure development is presented as mending fault lines between the central state and the marginalized peripheral areas like Northern Kenya.

On a micro-level, the residents, through their daily road-related practices and discourses (particularly prophecies), reconstruct the road as a common subject of their diverse identities. Particularly, through the symbol of the road, the Borana of Marsabit bring important aspects of their connection to Ethiopia, hence challenging some of the state’s assumptions that the road will literally bring them closer to the nation and make them feel more Kenyan. The multiple narratives associated with the road therefore in many ways capture the sense of social and political anxiety associated with the imminent development and modernization of Northern Kenya.

Finally, the story of the Isiolo-Marsabit highway demonstrates that despite all the new enchantment with infrastructure in (Northern) Kenya, much of what is happening are only additional layers on past, quite diverse and complex issues, which inform the way the projects are perceived on the ground.

## Notes

1. Harvey and Knox, “The Enchantments of Infrastructure,” 522.
2. Harvey and Knox, “The Enchantments of Infrastructure,” 523.
3. Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics,” 333.
4. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.
5. Herbst, *States and Power in Africa*.
6. Carrier and Kochore, “Navigating Ethnicity.”
7. GOK, *Vision 2030*, 6.
8. GOK, *Northern Kenya*, 12.
9. Greiner, “Land-use Changes.”
10. Herbst, *States and Power in Africa*, 75.
11. Taussig, *The Magic of the State*.
12. Ferguson, “Spatializing States,” 981.
13. Verhoeven, *Water, Civilization and Power in Sudan*.
14. Harvey and Knox, “The Enchantments of Infrastructure.”
15. Dalakoglou and Harvey, “Roads and Anthropology.”
16. Masquelier, “Road Mythographies,” 830.
17. Ibid.
18. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 45.
19. Ibid.
20. Hull, “On the Great North Road.”
21. Reece, *To My Wife: Fifty Camels*, 130.
22. Reece, *To My Wife: Fifty Camels*.
23. Interview, Ali Boru, Marsabit, 4 April 2014.
24. Elliott, “Planning.”
25. “How New Isiolo Marsabit Road is Boosting Commerce as Security Improves.” *Capital Business*, September 27, 2016. Accessed November 18, 2016. <http://www.capitalfm.co.ke/business/2016/09/new-isiolo-marsabit-road-boosting-commerce-security-improves/>.
26. Mohamed and Adhanom, “Kenya and Ethiopia, a Cross-border Initiative.”
27. Barasa, L. “500 KM Road Opens up Trade in Northern KENYA.”
28. Kenya NTV. “Moyale-Marsabit Road.”
29. LAPSET. Accessed November 19, 2016. <http://www.lcda.co.ke/projects/highways/>.

30. For more on this history see, Schlee, *Identities on the Move*, Chapter on “Nomads in the Colonial State.”
31. Anderson, “Remembering Wagalla.”
32. Wario Arero, “Coming to Kenya.”
33. Interview with Ali Boru, Marsabit, 4 April 2014.
34. Interview with county development officer, Mukindia, Marsabit, 2 April 2014.
35. Interview with Mohamud Kamaya, the clerk of the County Assembly of Marsabit, Marsabit, 7 April 2014.
36. Interview Ali Boru, Marsabit, April 2014.
37. *Matatus* are 14-seat passenger service vehicles.
38. Interview with Ali Boru, Marsabit, April 2014.
39. Classrooms and furniture are easily transported by vehicles as opposed to before when they were loaded onto pack animals.
40. Interview with Mohamud Kamaya, Marsabit, 7 April 2014.
41. GOK, *Vision 2030*.
42. Interview with Guyo Abbane, Bubisa, 9 April 2014.
43. Interview with Abudho Tuyye, Bubisa, 9 April 2014.
44. Interview with Guyo Malicha, Marsabit, 14 April 2014.
45. For example in the national media “New Highway brings Kenya Closer.” *The Daily Nation*, October 12, 2011. <http://www.nation.co.ke/counties/New-highway-brings-Kenya-closer/-/1107872/1254168/-/h1ns3h/-/index.html>.
46. Comprising of Garissa, Wajir, Mandera, Isiolo and Marsabit Counties.
47. Report of the Northern Frontier Commission, 1.
48. Whittaker, “The Socioeconomic Dynamics of *shifita* Conflict.”
49. Mburu, *Bandits on the Border*, 153.
50. KNA BB/12/49 PC EP to PPO, ER, G.51/Vol.II/58, 18 February 1967.
51. Interview with Galgallo Boru, Marsabit, 12 March 2014.
52. Highway robbers.
53. Angira, “Minister Escapes Injury.”
54. “Metropolitan Police Officer Killed in Kenya.” *The Telegraph*, January 15, 2013. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/kenya/9802367/Metropolitan-Police-officer-killed-in-Kenya.html>.
55. “Road Stories.” *BBC Radio 4*. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06vkgvw>.
56. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.
57. Taussig, *The Magic of the State*.
58. Line from a song composed by Aga Galgallo, a local Marsabit writer and composer.
59. Including the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, the Centre for Minority Rights Development and Democracy, Action Aid, Farm Africa and the Netherlands Development Organisation among others. See Konchora, “Great Trek Campaign Launched.”
60. Konchora, “Great Trek Campaign Launched.”
61. The candidate being referred to in the song.
62. Interview with Aga Galgallo, 16 April 2014.
63. Gitonga, “Raila Claims Credit for Road.”
64. Abdi, “Raila Ruto Battle for Isiolo.”
65. Huka, “Kibaki Commissions Isiolo Airport.”
66. Carrier and Kochore, “Navigating Ethnicity.”
67. Interview with Kanchora Wario, Marsabit, March 2014.
68. Johnson, “The Prophet Ngundeng.”
69. KNA/DC MBT 3/2/5 1940, 2.
70. KNA/ MDAR 1941, 3.
71. Mbembe and Nuttall, “Writing the World,” 349.
72. Interview with Guyo Malicha, Manyatta Jillo, 6 March 2014.
73. Interview with Halkano Ali, Manyatta Jillo, 6 March 2014.



74. "Resurrection of the Great North Road." *Tanzania Daily News*, November 12, 2012. <http://allafrica.com/stories/201211120043.html>.
75. Interview with Guyo Malicha, 14 March 2014.
76. Wario Arero, "Coming to Kenya."
77. Herbst, *States and Power in Africa*.

## Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to my supervisor, Dr Neil Carrier for the suggestions, critique and the indispensable guidance throughout the writing of the dissertation on which this paper is based. Big thanks too to the people of Marsabit for always putting up with my questions about the most mundane things despite me being a local and therefore 'should know'. Also many thanks to Elizabeth Watson and Jason Mosley for their editorial input and suggestions on how to improve the paper.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This paper is a product of my M.Sc. in African Studies dissertation at University of Oxford which was funded through the Commonwealth Shared Scholarship. The British Institute in Eastern Africa provided funding to support the fieldwork and facilitation to various workshops and the ECAS conference 2015 through which this paper was developed.

## References

- Abdi, A. 2012. "Raila Ruto Battle for Isiolo." *The Standard*, November 13. [http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000070548/raila-ruto-battle-for-isiolo-votes?articleID=2000070548&story\\_title=raila-ruto-battle-for-isiolo-votes&pageNo=2](http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000070548/raila-ruto-battle-for-isiolo-votes?articleID=2000070548&story_title=raila-ruto-battle-for-isiolo-votes&pageNo=2).
- Anderson, D. M. "Remembering Wagalla: State Violence in Northern Kenya, 1962–1991." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8, no. 4 (2014): 658–676.
- Angira, Z. 2013. "Minister Escapes Injury After His Car is Shot at." *Daily Nation*, January 10. <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/politics/1064-1662288-j46frx/index.html>.
- Barasa, L. 2016. "500 KM Road Opens up Trade in Northern KENYA." *Daily Nation*, October 25. Accessed November 18, 2016. <http://www.nation.co.ke/counties/marsabit/500-kmroad-opens-up-trade-in-northern-Kenya/3444778-3428834-format-xhtml-qdacr7z/index.html>.
- Carrier, N., and H. H. Kochore. "Navigating Ethnicity and Electoral Politics in Northern Kenya: The Case of the 2013 Election." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8, no. 1 (2014): 135–152.
- Dalakoglou, D., and P. Harvey. "Roads and Anthropology: Ethnographic Perspectives on Space, Time and (Im)Mobility." *Mobilities* 7, no. 4 (2012): 459–465.
- Elliott, H. "Planning, Property and Plots at the Gateway to Kenya's 'New Frontier.'" *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10, no. 3 (2016): 511–529. doi:10.1080/17531055.2016.1266196
- Ferguson, J. "Spatializing States: Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality." *American Ethnologist* 29, no. 4 (2002): 981–1002.
- Gitonga, K. 2007. "Raila Claims Credit for Road." *Daily Nation*, December 18. <http://allafrica.com/stories/200712180077.html>.
- GOK. *Vision 2030 Development Strategy for Northern Kenya and Other Arid Lands*. GOK Printer: Nairobi, 2011.

- Greiner, C. "Land-use Change, Territorial Restructuring, and the Economies of Anticipation in Dryland Kenya." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10, no. 3 (2016): 530–547. doi:10.1080/17531055.2016.1266197.
- Harvey, P., and H. Knox. "The Enchantments of Infrastructure." *Mobilities* 7, no. 4 (2012): 521–536.
- Herbst, J. *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Huka, H. 2013. "Kibaki Commissions Isiolo Airport." *The Standard*, February 9. <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/?articleID=2000076927&pageNo=1>.
- Hull, B. "On the Great North Road into Forgotten Kenya." *Al-Jazeera Blog*. 2008. Accessed September 20, 2015. <http://blogs.reuters.com/world-wrap/2008/07/09/on-the-great-north-road-into-forgotten-kenya/>.
- Johnson, D. H. "The Prophet Ngundeng and the Battle of Pading." Chap. 9 in *Revealing Prophets: Prophecy in Eastern African History*, edited by D. M. Anderson and D. H. Johnson, 196–220. Oxford: James Currey, 1995.
- Kenya NTV. 2016. "Moyale-Marsabit Road: Kenya's North Opened up as Link Road Finally Completed." *Kenya NTV*. Accessed November 19, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiSGpXlOeRg>.
- Konchora, G. 2004. "Great Trek Campaign Launched." *The Standard*, November 8. <http://allafrica.com/stories/200411081520.html>.
- Larkin, Brian. "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013): 327–343.
- Masquelier, A. "Road Mythographies: Space, Mobility, and the Historical Imagination in Postcolonial Niger." *American Ethnologist* 29 (2002): 829–856.
- Mburu, N. *Bandits on the Border: The Last Frontier in the Search for Somali Unity*. Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2005.
- Mohamed, A. A., and T. Adhanom. 2016. "Kenya and Ethiopia, a Cross-border Initiative to Advance PEACE and Development." *Thomson Reuters Foundation News*, January 5. Accessed November 19, 2016. <http://news.trust.org/item/20160105103325-lhafc/>.
- Reece, A. *To My Wife: 50 Camels*. London: Harvill, 1963.
- Schlee, G. *Identities on the Move: Clanship and Pastoralism in Northern Kenya*. Vol. 5. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989.
- Scott, J. C. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998.
- Taussig, M. T. *The Magic of the State*. East Sussex: Psychology Press, 1997.
- Vansina, J. M. *Oral Tradition as History*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.
- Verhoeven, H. *Water, Civilisation and Power in Sudan: The Political Economy of Military-Islamist State Building*. Vol. 131. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Wario Arero, H. "Coming to Kenya: Imagining and Perceiving a Nation among the Borana of Kenya." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 1, no. 2 (2007): 292–304.
- Whittaker, H. A. "The Socioeconomic Dynamics of the Shifta Conflict in Kenya, c. 1963–8." *The Journal of African History* 53, no. 3, (2012): 391–408.