Centro Studi Paesi Extraeuropei (CSPE)

Mapping a "Far Away" Town

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Source: *Africa: Rivista semestrale di studi e ricerche* , 2020, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2020), pp. 25–46

Published by: Viella SRL on behalf of Centro Studi Paesi Extraeuropei (CSPE)

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48684792

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Mapping a "Far Away" Town: Ethnic Boundaries and Everyday Life in Marsabit (Northern Kenya)

Abstract

Taking into account the stereotypical image of the small town of Marsabit (Northern Kenya), often described as a "far" and "not Kenyan" space affected by ethnic clashes and famine, appears useful to inquire how social relations build the space of the town reproducing new and ancient ties. The use of the town centre's maps is a good method for processing qualitative data and to acquire additional information about the urban space. By looking at the maps of Marsabit centre, it is possible to recognize that the ethnic lines in town are porous and flexible. Ethnicity creates and maintains group boundaries offering the very foundation of social interaction and subsequently of the understanding of (urban) space by individuals and groups. To delve into the spatial dimension of ethnic relations may allow a better understanding of the actual reality of a region characterized by fragile political, economic and social balances.

KEYWORDS: NORTHERN KENYA, SMALL TOWN, ETHNICITY, URBAN SPACE

Introduction

This paper focuses on the relational nature of the urban space of Marsabit. It is the capital of the eponymous county in Northern Kenya (Eastern Province), and the administrative and commercial headquarter of one amidst the biggest counties in the country. Main town, economical hub and social heart of a wide and sparsely populated region, Marsabit is a "marginal centre"[1] and an *unicum* in the social landscape of its county.

The discourses about Marsabit describe it as a "far away" town, somehow far and different from the Kenyan main centres. Historically, national development plans have provided little attention to Northern Kenya and this area has remained marginalized for a long time in comparison with the central regions of the count-

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1. F. Remotti, *Centri, capitali, città. Un'esplorazione nelle strutture politiche dell'Africa precoloniale subsahariana*, Torino, G. Giappichelli Editore, 1984, 39.

ry. The ethnic clashes, the porosity of Ethiopian and Somali borders, the insecu-
rity of roads and communication are considered the main problems of Northern
Kenya provinces. The stereotype of Marsabit and of the whole region as a "far
away" place dominated by tribalism, conflict and famine has historical implica-
tions and its roots lie in the colonial and post-colonial past[2]. I have often been told
that *Marsabit sio Kenya*, Marsabit is not Kenya. In Nairobi, as in Marsabit as
well, the idea that Marsabit County is a different, far and un-Kenyan area echoes
in everyday conversations. In a taxi, caught in Nairobi traffic, the driver expres-
sed his surprise at discovering that I was heading to Marsabit: "Really? Do you
stay in Marsabit? How can you survive there? *Marsabit sio Kenya*, it is not Ken-
ya. Now you are in Nairobi: welcome to Kenya, *karibu Nairobi*"[3]. In Marsabit, a
few months later, a friend came to say goodbye before a few days journey: "I am
traveling to Kenya. *Naenda nyumbani*, I am going home, I am going to Meru"[4].

While in the last decade processes of political decentralization and infra-
structures improvement have reduced the perception of Marsabit County as a
wild and undeveloped area, nevertheless, the town and the Northern Kenyan
lowlands are often described as far and inhospitable places. The whole Northern-
eastern Kenya is perceived as somewhere ambiguous in terms of identity, since
its inhabitants are Muslim and pastoralists, who are somehow closer to Somalis
and Ethiopians than to the population of central Kenya. In his work on the Soma-
li neighbourhood Eastleigh in Nairobi, Neil Carrier underlines that Somalis in
Kenya have long been considered "foreigners" and that "the history of arbitrary
border setting, as well as colonial neglect, isolation and militarization of the nor-
thern region of Kenya – where most Kenyan Somalis live – has left his mark on
perception of Somalis"[5]. Since colonial times and in particular during the era of
independence, Somalis and pastoral groups of north eastern border regions have
been recognized as an "'alien' presence in their own country of citizenship, and
places where they live – Northern Kenya and locations such as Eastleigh – as also
being somehow alien"[6]. Although this narrative does not seem to be as strong for
Marsabit as it is for the centres in the Northern-eastern provinces (Mandera,
Wajir, Garissa), nevertheless the town and its county still emanate today a "wild"
and "alien" aura.

Recently, waves of investments connected to the Kenya Vision 2030 go-
vernmental development project and in particular, to the Lamu Port and Lamu –
Southern Sudan- Ethiopia Transport corridor project (LAPSSET)[7] have affected

2. D.M. Anderson, "Remembering Wagalla: State Violence in Northern Kenya, 1962-91",
Journal of Eastern African Studies 8, 4, 2014, 658-676.
3. Conversations with a taxi driver, Nairobi, 14 September 2014.
4. Conversation with A. A., Marsabit, 5 May 2015.
5. N. Carrier, *Little Mogadishu. Eastleigh, Nairobi's Global Somali Hub*, London, Hurst &
Company, 2016, 222.
6. Carrier, *Little Mogadishu,* 222.
7. For further information about LAPSSET see http://www.lapsset.go.ke/ and http://mipakani.
net/ (accessed May 2019).

the border region between Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia. As the area is the core of national development planning, a substantial change in its physical and symbolic landscape is taking place[8]. Despite this, Northern Kenya's image as an "empty" and "wild" space affects the relationship between this border region and the country's centre, as well as the rural-urban interactions. Marsabit town lies in the centre of this "empty" space: a green spot amidst one of the most arid regions in Sub-Saharan Africa, an urban space connected with small rural villages surrounded by vast unpopulated areas.

Marsabit holds an ambiguous position in the national urban system and in Kenyan social and political life. It is, at the same time, the periphery of its country and the centre of a wide, historically marginalized region. Although national and international development plans have neglected the colonial Northern Frontier District (NFD) in the past, today they are gradually reducing the actual and perceived distance between the north of the country and its central regions. Between these two poles of attraction, Marsabit represents a fine example of those defined as "small town"[9], that constitute the African urban system and that rarely have been taken into account in urban and anthropological studies[10].

This paper is based on a thirteen-month long fieldwork carried out in Marsabit between 2013 and 2015, during which maps of the urban space turned out to be a worthwhile instruments to better process the qualitative data collected through the observation of everyday practices[11]. The maps presented in this paper integrated the cartographic reproduction of the urban space with the everyday experience of it. It is possible by recognizing different layers on which emerge the nodes and the reference points highlighted by Marsabit dwellers during interview and everyday talks and that have been included on the two-dimensional surface of the maps. As this paper will point out, Marsabit's maps complemented by ethnographic method results show not only the relational nature of urban space, but also the nuances that it assumes in the collective and individual perception of the city. This paper aims to bring out three main points that can contribute to the debate on African urbanism and can shed light on the role of secondary centres in the social and political dynamics of the continent.

The first premise is related to Marsabit's position in the African urban system as a secondary city. From ethnography held in town, the necessity to take into

8. H.H. Kochore, "The Road to Kenya: Visions, Expectations and Anxieties around New Infrastructure Development in Northern Kenya", *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 10, 3, 2016, 494-510.

9. J. Baker, ed., *Small Town Africa: Studies in Rural-Urban Interaction*, Uddevalla, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1990.

10. M. Hilgers, "Contribution à une anthropologie des villes secondaires", *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 52, 1, 2012, 29-55.

11. The cartographic maps analyzed in this paper have been created by integrating the cartographic image with qualitative data collected during fieldwork and bibliographic research. The reworking of the maps was possible thanks to the help of Trim group – Translate into Meaning (http://www.trimweb.it/index.html) and in particular with the help of Alessandro Demarchi.

account small and secondary centres emerged as vital for the analysis of urban experience in Africa. Although it has been historically marginalized, Marsabit has been recently affected by significant processes of change through which "modernity" seems to have finally descended upon Northern Kenya. Defined by its dwellers as "cosmopolitan", the town plays an essential role in the political and economic life of the region of which it is a centre in the everyday life of its inhabitants as well. Despite it, being "far away from", "different" and "smaller" than Kenya's capital Nairobi and other African megalopolises, the town conceals several layers of complexity and a "platform providing for and reproducing life in the city"[12] as the urbanist Abdoumalik Simone might put it. Maps clearly show that Marsabit is not just a small town "in the middle of nowhere", as I have been told several times, but a site of "super-diversity"[13] and an essential node in the urban/rural relations of the Kenyan urban system. In this sense, taking into account international development projects and regional geopolitical ones, Marsabit is a pivotal centre in which national and local identities are shaped through a multitude of trajectories.

Secondly, from the maps emerges the pedestrian point of view[14] and the relational nature of (urban) space. Relations concur not only to the definition of what a city is, but also to the very building of space. The *long durée* perspective and the ethnographic methods help gain a deeper comprehension of the meanings given to the urban centre by the subjectivities that inhabit it. If the individuals take part to the composition of places[15], the spatial analysis and the perspective on everyday practices allow to give back to Marsabit's dwellers the protagonist role[16] in the urban centre's work and persistence. Moreover, this approach helps to overcome the stereotypical view of Marsabit, and of whole Northern Kenya as well, that describes the region as an underdeveloped place victim of tribalism and famine.

Lastly, maps allow to recognize the continuity and the change as they reshape the urban space and the meanings the latter acquires for different subjects in the competition for natural and social resources. Marsabit is connected with the wide network of small villages in its rural surroundings as well as with the main

12. A. Simone, "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg", *Public Culture*, 16, 3, 2004, 407-429, 410.

13. S. Vertovec, "Super-diversity and its Implications", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30, 6, 2007, 1024-1054.

14. As Michel De Certeau states, city dwellers experience the urban space walking through its streets. Therefore, the images of the town and the ideas that create are grounded on the everyday practices that occur in town. The pedestrian point of view refers to this dimension of the urban sociality created and transformed by everyday interaction that "write" the "urban text" (M. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. S. Rendall, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984).

15. M. De Certeau, *La culture au pluriel*, Paris, Unione Général d'Éditions, 1974.

16. E. Jackson, "Fixed in Mobility: Young Homeless People and the City", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 36, 2012, 725-741.

cities of Kenya. It is an essential site where individual and collective subjectivities define themselves and through which they can shape the ideas of place and time (history)[17]. In a region historically affected by ethnic conflict and by the phenomenon of political tribalism[18] and ethnopolitics[19], the urban centre's history and everyday life practices shed light on the situational nature of ethnic belongings and their connection with the access to social and natural resources[20].

Marsabit as a "small town"

This paper aims to show that social relations build the space of the town by reproducing new and ancient ties in a context of strong and complex links between rural and urban spaces (both on national and local scale). Ethnic identities and subsistence strategies, but also small-scale trades and transnational migratory patterns, connect Marsabit with transnational spaces. They potentially make it a site of low-end globalization[21] in which economies and practices are embedded in an ongoing negotiation between rural and urban as well as global and local[22]. Moreover, by inquiring into its sociality the opportunity is given to recognize how space, politics and ethnicity are interwoven in the construction of urban space and in the way the latter is experienced by its inhabitants.

Nowadays official plans and discourses emphasize new waves of change through which the town and the county are becoming more "open" and object of a rapid development. Urban space represents the heart of redemption of the former Northern Frontier District and of its pastoral population after a history of neglect and marginalization[23]. Marsabit is a ship sailing unpredictable waters[24] that could seal the town off from the whole country or, on the contrary, bring it

17. E. Grasso, "Marsabit: dalle carovane al centro commerciale. Mappare una città accidentale", in C. Pennacini, A. Gusman, eds., *L'Africa delle città. Urban Africa*, Torino, Academia University Press, 2017, 275-287.

18. J. Lonsdale, "Moral Ethnicity and Political Tribalism", in P. Kaarsholm, J. Hultin, eds., *Inventions and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Roskilde, Institute for Development Studies, Roskilde University, 1994, 131-150.

19. J. Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics: A Conceptual Frameworks*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1981.

20. M. Bassi, "Primary Identities in the Lower Omo Valley: Migration, Cataclysm, Conflict and Amalgamation, 1750-1910", *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5, 1, 2011, 129-157.

21. G. Mathews, G.L. Ribeiro, C.A. Vega, *Globalization from Below: The World's Other Economy*, London, Routledge, 2012.

22. A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis-London, University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

23. G. Schlee, A.A. Shongolo, *Pastoralism & Politics in Northern Kenya & Southern Ethiopia*, Oxford, James Currey, 2012, 1-34; H. Whittaker, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Kenya: A Social History of the Shifta Conflict, 1963-68*, Boston, Brill, 2014, 1-23.

24. D. Abraham, *A Story of Marsabit: A Study of Home*, 2016, www.addastorie.org (accessed 11 May 2019).

closer to the country's centre. I argue that the ambivalent position of Marsabit between the two poles of the Kenyan national urban system could be seen as a metaphor of the role that urban space plays as infrastructure, providing services and spaces through which individual and collective subjectivities engage with each other. As AbdouMaliq Simone states, urban space as infrastructure "is capable of facilitating the intersection of socialities so that expanded spaces of economic and cultural operation become available to residents of limited means"[25]. In this sense, Marsabit is not a remote centre but a site constructed through an ongoing process of redefinition of groups and urban boundaries that allows subjects to engage in relationships with other subjects in other spaces at local, national and transnational level.

In accordance with this perspective, inquiring into the urban sociality of a region which is traditionally inhabited by nomadic pastoral groups[26] and in which the urban phenomenon is limited to few small towns, is to acknowledge the relationship between resources, space, time and identities[27], putting secondary and small centres at the core of the debate about urbanity in Africa. As African urban population growth is characterized by the proliferation of small centres[28] and since the continent is experiencing extensive processes of political and administrative decentralization, local voices are becoming more and more important[29]. Therefore, new urban communities are essential national actors and nodes in wide transnational networks[30]. Despite this and although secondary centres host the majority of the African urban population, historically social research has focused almost exclusively on the analysis of large cities[31]. Presuming that the urban world is not limited to megalopolises but that it is characterized by a profound

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25. Simone, "People as Infrastructure", 407.

26. N. Sobania, *A Background History to the Mount Kulal Region of Northern Kenya*, Nairobi, UNESCO, 1979, 12-19.

27. G. Schlee, "Territorializing Ethnicity: The Imposition of a Model of Statehood on Pastoralists in Northern Kenya and Southern Ethiopia*"*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36, 5, 2013, 857-874; M. Bassi, "The Politics of Space in Borana Oromo, Ethiopia: Demographics, Elections, Identity and Customary Institutions", *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 4, 2, 2010, 221-246.

28. United Nation Habitat, *The State of African Cities 2014: Re-imagining Sustainable Urban Transition*, Nairobi, United Nation Habitat, 2014, 23.

29. S. Ndegwa, B. Levy, *The Politics of Decentralization in Africa: A Comparative Analysis*, Washington, The World Bank, 2003.

30. M. Hilgers, "Contribution à une anthropologie des villes secondaires", *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 52, 1, 2012, 29-55, 29-30.

31. J. Robinson, *Ordinary Cities: Between, Modernity and Development*, London, Routledge, 2006; D. Bell, M. Jayne, *Small Cities: Urban Experience Beyond the Metropolis*, London, Routledge, 2006; Hilgers, *Une ethnographie à l'échelle de la ville*; F. De Boeck, A. Cassiman, S. Van Wolputte, "Recentering the City: An Anthropology of Secondary Cities in Africa", in K. Bakker, eds., *African Perspectives 2009. The African Inner City: (Re)sourced*, Pretoria, University of Pretoria, Department of Architecture, 2010, 33-41; L. Fourchard, "Between World History and State Formation: New Perspective on Africa's Cities", *Journal of African History*, 52, 2011, 214-227.

heterogeneity[32], it is essential to investigate the peculiarities of these minor urban universes and their social organization[33].

Although it is problematic to define a "small town", it is possible to acknowledge a town as small according to the national urban system in which centres with different demographic dimension are placed[34]. David Belle and Mark Jayne underlined that the "smallness" of a city is related to its inhabitant's comprehension of its position into a network in which their town is in between villages, on one side, and one or few megalopolises on the other[35]. According to this perspective, with its 14.907 inhabitants[36] Marsabit does not only look like a "grown village", but it is a secondary city or "small town" that plays a pivotal role in the rural-urban relationships, in terms of culture production and new forms of urban sociality in the region.

Mapping a "far away" town

Drawing the maps of Marsabit turned out to be a turning point in my work of writing and organizing the data collected during the fieldwork. Like the maps described by Tim Ingold, the maps presented in this paper are closely linked to the context in which they have been drawn, to my sight of the city and to the steps I took along its streets. Somehow, they are closer to the sketch maps than to the modern cartographic maps. They are designed "along" the proceeding of history and comprehend different elements on a surface without frame and never definitive, never complete[37]. Processing data of different nature (ethnographic observation, archival research, environmental analysis ...), new layers have been added to the flat and "empty" surface of the cartographic map. It is not just a narration ploy. It makes possible to recognize new and more complex images of Marsabit. As in a pop-up book, therefore, maps allow to catch the glimpse of the "rhythms"[38] and the super-diversity that characterized the urban space.

Furthermore, from maps emerge that the urban space is build and shared by its inhabitants trough lines that divide it and relationships that circumvent ethnic

32. Bell, Jayne, *Small Cities,* 683.

33. Hilgers, "Contribution à une anthropologie des villes secondaires", 30.

34. R.A. Obudho, G.O. Aduwo, "Small Urban Centres and Spatial Planning of Kenya", in Baker, ed., *Small Town Africa*, 51; United Nation Habitat, *Meeting Development Goals in Small Urban Centres: Water and Sanitation in the World's Cities*, Nairobi, United Nation Habitat, 2006, 134-14; Hilgers, "Contribution à une anthropologie des villes secondaires", 38.

35. Bell, Jayne, *Small Cities,* 3.

36. Kenya National Bureau of Statistic (KNBS), *The 2009 Population and Housing Census: Vol. Ia Population Distribution by Administrative Units*, Nairobi, Republic of Kenya, 2010, 207.

37. T. Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History*, Routledge, London, 2007, 84-85.

38. F. De Boeck, "'Divining' the City: Rhythm, Amalgamation and Knotting as Forms of Urbanity", *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies*, 41, 1, 2015, 1-12.

and religious belongings. The theoretical approaches of Doreen Massey[39] and Tim Ingold[40] – which implicate social engagements with space in the construction of subjectivities and relations to others – are then substantial to better comprehend Marsabit. Elizabeth E. Watson[41] explored the way in which landscape is constructed, imagined, inhabited and moved through in Northern Kenya. She highlighted that engagements with space are implicated in the construction, performance and experience of identity and in the way in which relations to others are constructed and negotiated. Similar to her point of view, Massey and Ingold's work has much to add to the understanding of identity and conflict in Africa, emphasizing the political and material ramifications of changing use, experience and engagement with space[42].

Viewed as the product of relations, space reveals that relations are necessarily embedded in material practices. Moreover, to recognize the multiple trajectories and heterogeneity through which space is constructed leads to consider the complexity of the reality in which relations and subjectivities are embedded and to spatialize the social theory in order to get an acknowledgement of subjects' simultaneous coexistences. The space is thus something always under construction, something always "open" and never "closed". Re-drawn Marsabit map adding new and different layers has been a substantial step to recognize the multilocality and multivocality[43] of the town and its role in the definition of individual and collective subjectivities.

The city as a resource

Diachronic approach allows to observe how in Northern Kenya the "local" idea of space and the individual and collective action of space construction through inter-relations have been deeply changed since the colonial power took control over land and people. Through the takeover and the mapping process of the region between Kenyan Highlands and the Horn of Africa the arid lowland's "open space" turned to a "tamed space". European colonial power "tamed" this "surface" through an action that has not been "innocent", replacing multiple trajectories of understanding of self and space (and of history) with a single trajectory[44].

At the beginning of twentieth century, British officials encountered fluid societies that were able to adapt to unstable ecological niches and to absorb nei-

39. D. Massey, *For Space*, London, Sage, 2005.

40. Ingold, *Lines.*

41. E.E. Watson "A 'Hardening of Lines': Landscape, Religion and Identity in Northern Kenya", *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 4, 2, 2010, 201-220.

42. Watson, "A 'Hardening of Lines'", 202.

43. M.C. Rodman, "Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality", *American Anthropologist*, 94, 3, 1992, 640-656.

44. Massey, *For Space*, 29-30.

ghbours in need[45]. Societies and groups connected by ethnic and inter-ethnic re-
lationships[46] used to survive through different and complementary subsistence
livelihood patterns[47] in a space imagined and experienced along migratory and
nomadic paths and cultural and ethnic fluid trajectories. Colonial power did not
invent ethnic groups in this part of the Protectorate. Despite this, as underlined by
Günther Schlee, the character of ethnicity and its political and economic implica-
tions have changed a lot since then: "The most important form of change, and the
root of other changes, has been the territorialisation of ethnicity. Groups that did
not have bounded territories now have them"[48]. Nevertheless, in North-eastern
Africa it is evident that ethnic belongings are strictly linked to movement[49] and to
the access to resources[50]. They are involved in an ongoing process of definition of
multiple and changing identities that, like for the Borana people studied by Marco
Bassi, "overlap at different levels of segmentation (family, lineage, clan, ethnic
group or tribe, nation), based on a variety of emic classificatory criteria (genealo-
gical, linguistic, religious, insiders/outsiders), and influenced by an ongoing pro-
cess of social stratification [...]"[51]. Not an atavistic element that evokes precolo-
nial times, ethnic belongings are multiple and fluid, although it is rarely declared
in everyday talks and narratives, and they are connected with identities, natural
environment and politics, as argued by Marco Bassi introducing the concept of
"primary identity"[52]. Therefore, the colonial control over resources and over ur-
ban space meant, on one hand, a change in the nature of ethnicity and, on the o-
ther, the acquisition by the town of new and complex meanings. In this sense, it
is possible to look at the urban space as to the very resource to compete over or
to share.

The city as an alien element

Sitting at the table of one of the cafes in Marsabit, Guyo gives me the best
definition I've ever heard of the city of Marsabit: "It's a small town, an acciden-

45. R. Waller, "Ecology, Migration, and Expansion in East Africa", *African Affairs*, 84, 1985,
347-370.
46. G. Schlee, *Identities on the Move: Clanship and Pastoralism in Northern Kenya*,
Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1989, ch. 5.
47. N. Sobania, "Pastoralist Migration and Colonial Policy: A Case Study from Northern
Kenya", in D.J. Douglas, D.M. Anderson, eds., *The Ecology of Survival: Case Studies from
Northeast African History*, London, Lester Crook Academic Publishing, 1988, 219-239.
48. Schlee, "Territorializing Ethnicity", 858.
49. D. Turton, "The Meaning of Place in a World of Movements: Lessons from Long-term
Field Research in Southern Ethiopia", *Journal of Refugees Studies*, 18, 3, 2005, 258-280, 267.
50. Waller, "Ecology, Migration, and Expansion in East Africa", 357.
51. Bassi, "The Politics of Space in Borana Oromo, Ethiopia", 224.
52. Bassi, "Primary Identities in the Lower Omo Valley", 130.

tal town that grew by accident"[53]. Founded at the beginning of the twentieth century on a volcanic mountain covered with forest and surrounded by the desert, Marsabit seems a lapse of history, "an accident" that happened not too long ago at the meeting between different worlds: the nomadic world of pastoralists, the world of trades of Somali clans, the world of peoples fleeing from Southern Ethiopia[54] from Menelik II and, finally, the world of the colony. In reality, these worlds, if we exclude the colonial one, had met long before and since the sixteenth century they have lived together according to a complex system of alliances[55].

Few things are known about the pre-colonial past of the region. There are no signs of permanent settlements on the mountain before the arrival of European traders at the beginning of the twentieth century. Before then, the mountain was inhabited only for certain periods of the year by nomads who were dedicated to a highly mobile form of pastoralism[56]. Even less is known about the very original inhabitants of the mountain and it is only possible to imagine that they may have

53. Interview with W. G., Marsabit, May 2015.

54. As reported by Adano Wario Roba and Karen Witsemburg, in the late nineteenth century, among the first settled inhabitants of the mountain of Marsabit were Gabras who had escaped the aggression of the Abyssinians (K.M. Witsenburg, R.A. Wario, *Surviving Pastoral Decline. Pastoral Sedentarisation, Natural Resource Management and Livelihood Diversification in Marsabit District, Northern Kenya*, Lampeter, Edwin Mellen Press, 2008, 132). In 1896, after the historic victory over the Italians at Adwa, emperor Menelik II took advantage of his position of power and the political unity of Ethiopia to attempt expansion southwards, towards the Oromo territories on the border with the British protectorate and towards the province of Ogaden, on the border with Somalia.The imperial expansion was motivated, on the one hand, by the need to save Ethiopia from the European colonial invasion, and, on the other, by the ambition to gain access to new and much-needed resources (G. Oba, *Nomads in the Shadows of Empires. Contests, Conflicts and Legacies on the Southern Ethiopian-Northern Kenyan Frontier*, Leiden-Boston Brill, 2013, 33; for an overview of Ethiopian borderlands history, see R. Pankhurst, *The Ethiopian Borderlands: Essays in Regional History from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, Trenton, NY, Red Sea Press, 1997). The Ethiopian imperial forces displayed particular cruelty towards nomadic and semi-nomadic populations, and their incursions resulted in widespread devastation and hunger along the borders with the British Protectorate. In the 1897, the last phase of the Ethiopian expansion in the Horn of Africa saw the conquest of the Borana region, which caused further losses for the populations involved. It encouraged emigration towards the south and had a high social, economic and political impact on the region. At the same time, the Southern region of Abyssinia was affected by pressure from Somali clans from the East and from the Ogaden (Oba, *Nomads in the Shadow of Empires*, 25). Therefore, due also to the porosity of the borders between Abyssinia and the British Protectorate, since the end of the nineteenth century, nomadic pastoral groups and Burji and Konso farmers moved from the southern region of Ethiopia to the British Northern Frontier District. After the foundation of the town of Marsabit in 1907, British officials encouraged Burji and Konso farmers to move to Marsabit from the border town of Moyale/Moiale (the town is divided by the Kenian – Ethiopian border. Moyale is the Kenyan part of the town, while Moiale is the Ethiopian part) to start farming for the administration (Witsemburg, Wario, *Surviving Pastoral Decline*, 134).

55. Schlee, *Identities on the Move,* 33-34.
56. Sobania, *A Background History,* 40.

been groups of hunters and gatherers part a dynamic system of livelihoods patterns as described by Neal Sobania[57].

In the sixteenth century, groups speaking Oromo languages from Ethiopian highlands reached the now Kenyan territories where they specialized in nomadic cattle breeding. Among them, Borana people descended to Northern Kenya from the current Ethiopia, while Somali clans reached the Marsabit region from the east. Between the end of the nineteenth century and the first twenty years of the twentieth century, some Gabra groups fleeing from attacks by the Turkana and Dassanech clans settled on the slopes of the mountain of Marsabit, which from then on was certainly inhabited by Gabras[58], but also by Rendille and, before that, by groups that spoke the languages of the Maa group, such as Llikipiak Maasai and Samburu[59]. Even before the emergence of its urban space, Marsabit was already an important junction in the migratory routes of pastoral groups. Hunters and gatherers lived on the mountain, while pastoral groups shared different but complementary economic and cultural models through a fluid network of connections and relationships between households and clans even if from different ethnic roots[60].

Since the establishment of the British Protectorate of East Africa in 1895, little attention has been given to its regions north of the Equator. Only in 1907 did the British administration inaugurate its permanent presence in the Northern provinces with a base on the mountain of Marsabit. In previous years, the region that stretched from Mount Kenya to Abyssinia and the plains of the River Juba had aroused interest only for the prospects of earnings in the ivory trade and as a hunting ground. Described as "uninhabited space", "empty space", "untraced region"[61], inhabited by populations difficult to reach and not involved in the process of colonization, first, and development of the colony, then, what on the map of the protectorate was called Northern Frontier District would see the first visit of an agent of the colonial administration only in 1901[62].

When some pioneers of trade in the region managed to obtain permission to settle in Marsabit, as well as Moyale, the whole north was still a no-man's land while the definition of the borders with Abyssinia and Italian Somalia had required a long negotiation[63]. Boma Trading Company built the first mud house on Lake Donaldson Smith (later renamed Paradise), at the height of the volcanic massif of Marsabit, and it was clear to British officials themselves that the commercial enterprise was the best way to penetrate the region, acquire sensitive information and establish the basis of population control. It was 1907 and on Lake

57. Sobania, *A Background History,* 16-18.
58. Witsenburg, Wario, *Surviving Pastoral Decline*, 132.
59. Sobania, *A Background History,* 26-38.
60. Schlee, *Identities on the Move,* ch. 5.
61. M. Brown, *Where Giants Trod: The Saga of Kenya's Desert Lake*, London, Quiller Press Ltd, 1989, 316.
62. Brown, *Where Giants Trod*, 317.
63. Oba, *Nomads in the Shadows of Empires*, 33-55.

Paradise the city of Marsabit saw the light of day. The Boma Trading Company, which was the first permanent settlement on the mountain, closed its doors in 1909. The British administration, however, remained in Marsabit for the next fifty years[64], moving from the volcanic crater to the area of the Aite wells, an area still known as Karantina by the word quarantine, or quarantine for animals introduced by the colonial administration[65].

In 1921 the Northern Frontier District came under the military control of the King's African Rifles (KARs). It became a closed district in which non-residents were not allowed to enter and through which they could not pass. During this period, offices and residential areas were built for colonial officials and in Marsabit, in the area called Boma (it was so called the city centre, or the area now known as Township), two shops were opened, one Indian and one Somali. With the construction of a pump-operated water supply system and some corn fields, these small businesses were the only businesses in the city[66]. In 1925 the area returned to civil administration and additional administrative services were made operational[67] although, until the outbreak of World War II, activities in the city were not significantly increased[68]. The Marsabit Annual Reports compiled by colonial officials say that in the 1930s the city's population was still relatively small, despite the fact that Marsabit was recognised as a township in 1928. In 1931, there were 262 permanent inhabitants of the small town, 109 of whom were Burji and Konso from Ethiopia. The administration in fact had favoured the migration of small family groups from the area of Moyale to start agricultural production for British officials. From 1931 onwards, data on the population of the region show that this migration of groups of farmers had taken a consistent form. In 1935, in fact, 664 people settled on the mountain, mostly from the regions straddling the Ethiopian border. As early as 1936, these new inhabitants were allowed to settle in the areas of Karantina and Majengo Mpeya (probably from Swahili "new buildings") and were also granted small plots of land. Until the Second World War, the three largest pastoral groups – Gabra, Borana and Rendille – were forbidden to settle in the forest and on the mountain. British policy was in fact to allow only those who could make a concrete contribution to the economy of the centre to stay in the city, provided they were not Somalis[69].

Marsabit, the city created by the colony, stood at the centre of the empty space of the Gabra District[70]. Modernity, as well as colonial power, found their elective space in the city, as had happened in all colonial centres on the continent.

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64. Brown, *Where Giants Trod*, 342.

65. Witsenburg, Wario, *Surviving Pastoral Decline*, 132.

66. Witsenburg, Wario, *Surviving Pastoral Decline*, 132-133.

67. P. Tablino, *The Gabra: Camel Nomads of Northern Kenya*, Nairobi, Paulines Publication Africa, 1999, 30.

68. Witsenburg, Wario, *Surviving Pastoral Decline*, 133.

69. Witsenburg, Wario, *Surviving Pastoral Decline*, 133-134.

70. Kenya National Archives, Nairobi, PC/NFD 1/2/2, 1917-1929, Marsabit District Annual Report, 1917.

They entered the nomadic world of the region with the residences of the colonial officers, the first water pumping system, the police convoys, the tribal grazing a-reas and the "rational" management of resources. In 1921, the modernity of urban life also took the form of two emporiums that were opened in the Boma, belonging to a Somali merchant and an Indian who established the city market[71].

The subjects taking part in the founding of the small colonial outpost can be defined as "foreigners". That is, they did not belong to the pastoral panorama of the nomadic groups that referred to the mountain of Marsabit. The inhabitants of the newly founded town were relatively few and "non-native" – British, Goans, Indians, Arabs and Somalis – to which we must add the Burji and Konso far-mers[72]. Until the Second World War, the colonial administration discouraged the three major pastoral groups from locating to the mountain, maintaining a policy of control over the nascent agglomeration. In the period between the two World Wars, the British administration exercised a strict control also on the livestock and on the mobility of the pastoralists, whose travel distances had decreased due to the creation of "tribal grazing areas"[73] and thanks to the new state of security introduced by the colonial government. Many camel shepherds began to introduce cows into the herds in their possession, and the population living on the mountain of Marsabit, when was the only one that could integrate agricultural activities with cattle breeding, continued to grow and with it also the portions of cultivated land.

In the back of a small shop on Wabera Road, an old Burji, after having spre-ad on the floor in front of us a large map of the neighbourhood Shauri Yako[74], offered me his account of the history of the city: "Once there were many Somalis in the city, before Kenya gained independence. Afterwards they came and took them away [...], so the Somalis, after independence, went to their country". Even Guyo, during one of our long conversations, sitting at a table in the Psalms Café, confirmed the presence of many Somalis in the city: "This city in the sixties was an Indian and Somali city and there were also Borana and Burji"[75].

71. Witsenburg, Wario, *Surviving Pastoral Decline*, 132-133.

72. Witsenburg, Wario, *Surviving Pastoral Decline*, 133-134

73. Grazing areas defined by the colonial administration that limited the movements of Samburu, Turkana, Gabra, Borana and Somali pastoralists. After the independence of the country, those areas scored on colonial maps became the Samburu, Turkana, Marsabit, Wajir and Mandera Districts. E. Fratkin, E.A. Roth, eds., *As Pastoralists Settle. Social, Health, and Economic Consequences of Pastoral Sedentarization in Marsabit District, Kenya*, New York, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publisher, 2005, 40.

74. In Kiswahili *shauri yako* literally means "your business" or "up to you". The neighborhood arose in the 1970s when "[…] the Council gave them the land and told them: "If you are going to settle there, it is all *shauri yako*, your business. You can build whenever you want". That was the reason the area is called *shauri yako*, your business …", Interview with A. B., Marsabit, 20 May 2015.

75. Interview with W. G., Marsabit, 15 May 2015.

Descending Wabera Road, before arriving at the Indian-flavoured houses – which had to be the same as those built in the markets of Nairobi and the other colonial centres of Kenya at the beginning of the twentieth century – you are faced with the whole history of Marsabit. The road runs along the large plot of land owned by the Catholic Church where, in the early 1960s, Italian priests and a bishop built the first church and began Catholic evangelization in the region[76]. On the other hand, one-storey colonial buildings house a couple of warehouses and a carpenter. Here, Dabasso Wabera – the first African District Commissioner of the British colony – had his office. Further on, there is Mangia, Marsabit's oldest shop: an Indian-owned hardware store, the pride of the owner whose parents arrived in the city well before independence. Beyond the courtyard of the Catholic Church, up to the intersection leading to the hospital and the Bankhotas neighbour[77], other sheet metal houses with sloping roofs and a small colonial-era blockhouse accommodate a few carpenters and a primary school. Where two of the main streets intersect on the entry and exit roads of the Town, you can see, on the one hand, one of the oldest corners of the city, bordered by the Catholic Church and the mosque, and on the other the Anglican Church beyond the market area. A large stretch of road divides the courtyard of the mosque and the area of the actual market, which, in turn, reaches the Anglican Church. This stretch of road divides Township from Shauri Yako where the vegetable gardens and cultivations of the first Burji, Konso and Borana groups that settled there have given way to a densely inhabited area. It has expanded around the market area, climbing up on the hill above it and going as far as the small depression that leads to the area of Bankhotas and the hospital. Shauri Yako is crossed by the continuation of Wabera Road which today is one of the busiest inner streets of the city. Township is the oldest district along with Old Town, towards the Aite wells, where the British administration settled and where the first Somali and Indian trade opened, but Shauri Yako is also a historical place of settlement. From these areas of historical settlement, the urban life of Marsabit came to life and from here the market developed (Map 1).

One afternoon, Nur, a Marsabit resident of Indian origin, told me what he remembered about the city's past. From the entrance of the hardware store inherited from his father, Nur listed the names of the old owners of the buildings overlooking the road. Nur, digging into his childhood memories, recalled a series of names and origins that filled the street with lives and stories from afar. "The city was all here"[78], he told me after recollecting Somali, Indian and Arab names from the past. The inhabitants of Marsabit evoked by Nur invite to a careful reflection on the birth of the city and on the protagonists of this "accident".

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76. P. Tablino, *Christianity among the Nomads: The Catholic Church in Northern Kenya. Vol. II*, Nairobi, Paulines Publications Africa, 2006, 122; E. Grasso, *Incontri con l'altro. Missionari "in cammino" tra i gabra del Kenya*, Torino, Meti Edizioni, 2019, 57-80.
77. The area is called Bankhotas after the first bank opened in town in the 1970s.
78. Interview with N. M., Marsabit, 22 May 2015.
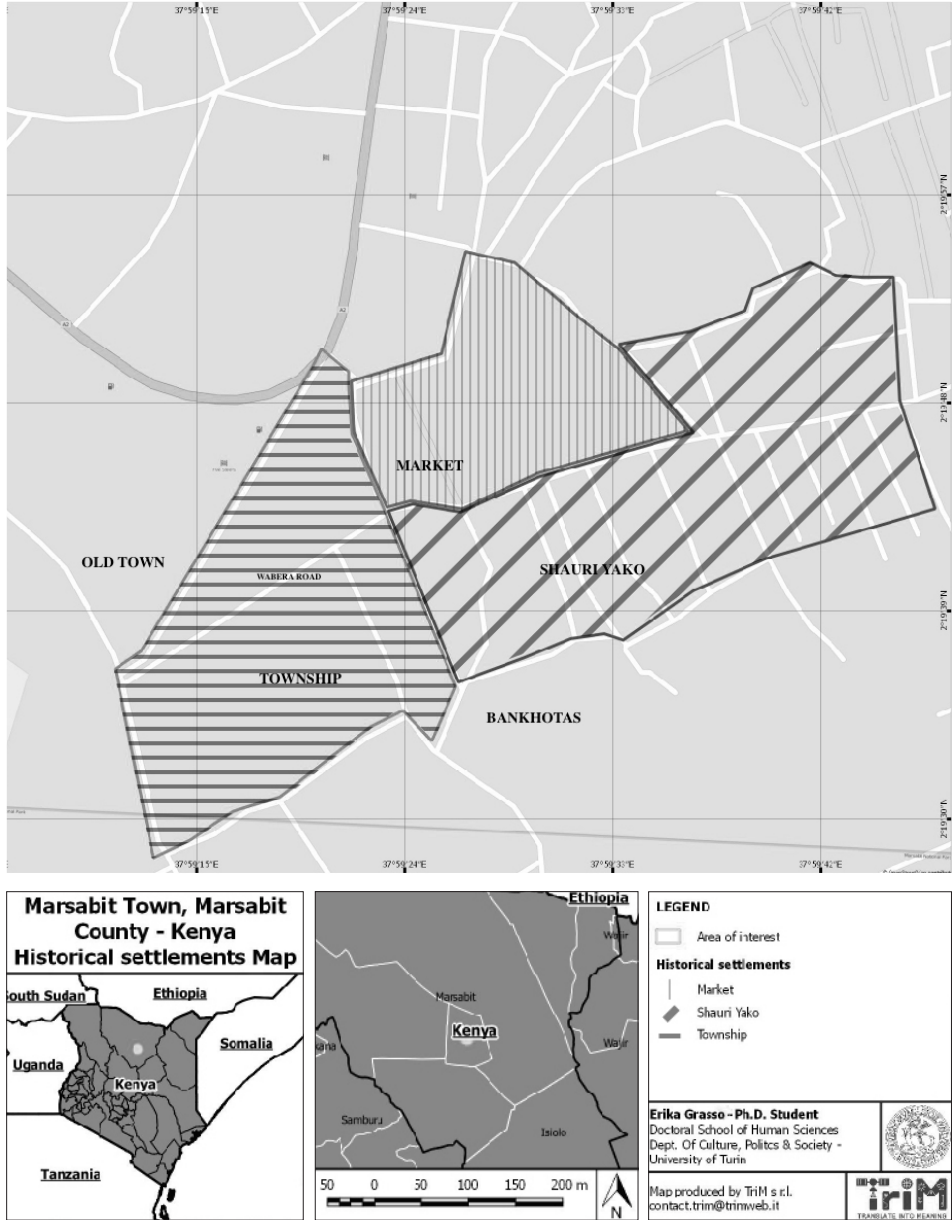
Map. 1. Marsabit Town, historical settlements.

The urban centre, founded as a colonial outpost with purely commercial and administrative functions, is an artefact imagined and built – both ideally and concretely – by actors "alien" to the ethnic and cultural landscape of the region. In a completely nomadic world, the city is an invention of the "other", an "accidental" fact. The city and the permanent market, which replaced the exchanges that nomadic groups had at the junctions of their migratory routes, are "alien" elements to pastoral culture. As long as colonial control kept the pastoral groups outside the city centre and the ecological crises made the city a pole of attraction for those who could not survive in the desert, Marsabit remained a place for the "other".

This can be observed on Map 1. The map reproduces the oldest settlement areas from which urban development started in the early twentieth century. Township and Shauri Yako neighbourhoods face the market area and are part of the city centre. The colonial city, here as elsewhere, had administrative and commercial functions: in Marsabit's case, its origins are strictly connected with "foreigners". And it seems possible to argue that "foreigners" have been the actual "makers" of the new born town. We can assume that in a purely nomadic world, as Northern Kenya was, the emergence of an urban space on Marsabit Mountain was allowed by the foreigners' presence.

Map 2 shows how the alterity is still in the "centre core". Still today, Township, Old Town and Shauri Yako surround the market and constitute the core of the town's everyday life. On the map, it is possible to observe some of the "hot spots" of the centre. The main churches and the main mosque, "alien" elements in the local culture that arrived in the region thanks to foreigners' presence in the region, reside in the hub of the town and somehow on the market area's boundaries. It is possible to say the same about the livestock market and the mill, while transports' stations are placed in the core of urban social life space. Looking at ancient neighbourhoods and hot spots position, it is my conviction that alterity is not just the maker of the urban space. Even today, it plays a crucial role in the "centre core". Furthermore, through the market, it offers to the urban population opportunities for conviviality and sociability that ignore or transcend ethnic affiliation.

The names of shops too suggest that alterity still plays a pivotal role in urban life. Shops in the oldest side of the market, the narrow streets between Shauri Yako and the commercial area, have signs and names in Swahili or English, while shops located in the streets further up north display names in Borana language or local traditional referents (i.e. Moyale Modern Hotel, Nomads Hotel, Keisut Building, Dadacha Enterprise, Jaldesa Shop, Ibse Shop). The "swahili" area is occupied by sailors, carpenters, women's salons managed by people from Kenya's southern and central regions, called "down country people". Where Somalis and Indians opened the very first commercial activities, today other "strangers" offer to the town the "impossible things" that are not possible to produce in the pure nomadic and pastoral livelihood, for example fruits and vegetables, carpenter's products and all those goods not related with livestock economy. As
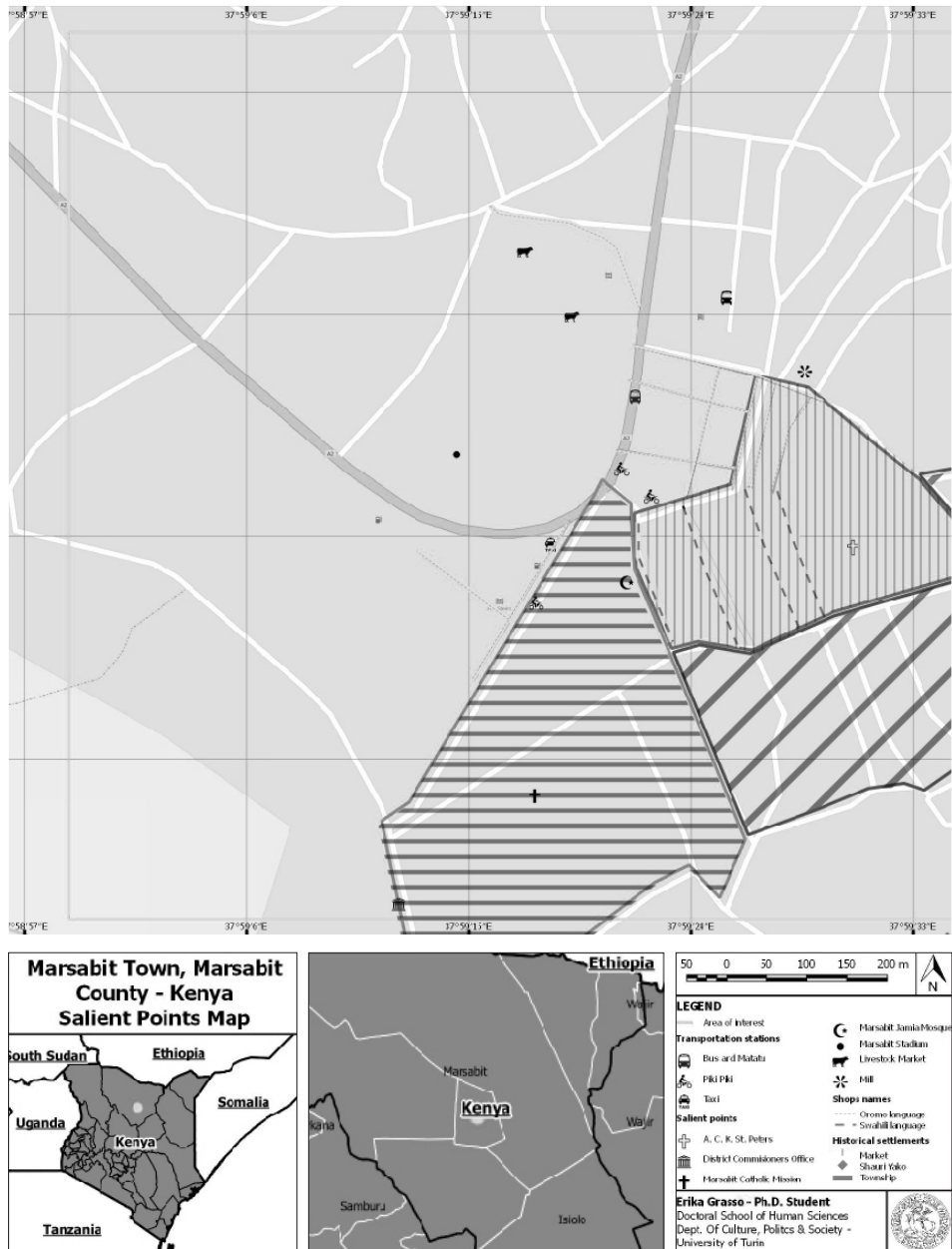
Map 2. Marsabit Town, Salient Points.

in the past, the "impossible things market"[79] is the heart of the town. This map sheds light on two aspects of Marsabit's centre. First, that alterity still is in the town's hub with the "impossible things market" that is connected with the rest of the county and of the country by the means that reach and leave the town every day. Second, that alterity, with the churches and the mosque, somehow guards the limit of the market area and lays the foundations of a space for relations that can cross the ethnic vertical division in society.

Other elements point out at the fact that the town is always under construction and that urban space (and its perception) is situational depending on everyday life experience and on the way people imagine the town. Although currently is a bit peripheral, in the past the livestock market occupied the centre of the commercial area where today the mill is situated. A new big and tall building – described by an administrative official as "a mall like those in Nairobi"[80] – replaced the old and dusty market structure while a long awaited paved road reached Marsabit in 2016. The new road, as the new mall as well, will change the urban life experienced by Marsabit County inhabitants completely.
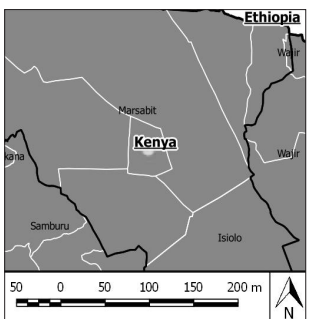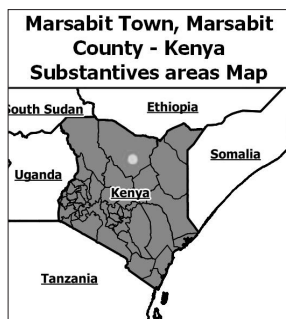
Having said that, it is interesting to look at the present perception of the town (Map 3). It appears that people recognize some areas in the town centre as "ethnically substantive". Marsabit people indeed used to refer to some points in the town as ethnic corners or places. To better understand the space configuration of Marsabit, it is useful to look at the Gabra and the Rendille corners. Both of them face the main road – the highway that connects Nairobi to Moyale and to the Ethiopian border – that crosses the town and that is the backbone of Marsabit County. It is clear that a kind of south-north polarisation exists in the county as well as in the town. Considering that the Rendille community used to look at the south-western side of the county as its "root land" and that the Gabra community refers to the villages in the Northern Marsabit, we can observe the same polarisation in the town. It is clear that this polarisation is based on the movements in and out of the town. Rendille and Gabra corners lie on the two poles where cars and means of transportation reaching or leaving the town stop and where people can find their own community network in town.

Assuming that the space is at first something relational, the south-north polarisation in the town shows at least two elements. The vitality and the growth of these two points seems to be related with the power and prestige that the two communities – that here find their "substantive space"- have gained lately. Considering the recent claim of a new market "for Rendille" in the area recognized as Rendille and the birth of the *Soko Gabra* – a Gabra's market – after the 2005-2006 clashes between Borana e Gabra[81], on one hand, allows to understand how

79. I draw the concept of "impossible things market" from Alberto Salza who kindly shared with me his years experiences and reflections about Northern Kenya pastoral societies in long and fruitful conversations in his house in Turin.

80. Interview with A. O., Marsabit, 23 May 2015.

81. O.G. Mwangi, "Kenya Conflict in the 'Badlands': The Turbi Massacre in Marsabit District", *Review of African Political Economy*, 33, 107, 2006, 81-91.

Map 3. Marsabit Town, substantives areas.

the space in town is closely connected with the relationships between the communities and on the other hand, how the political power affects the way in which space is built and perceived. It is important to underline that these areas in town are not "mono-ethnic" districts in demographic terms. What makes us look to these areas as "ethnically substantive" is the social recognition of these areas as "ethnic". The south-north polarisation also shows that the movements in the county are not only directed and refer mostly to Nairobi – the capital and the economical centre in Kenya –but to Ethiopia and to the town of Moyale as well. The connection with Ethiopia, ancestral home of the majority of the groups, still plays a great role in the everyday life of the town and of the communities. This is clear especially for the Borana people, who find on the border (in the towns of Moyale and Sololo) the only other large Borana communities in the county. Being mostly urbanized, they clearly look and refer to Moyale and Sololo to the north and to Isiolo to the south, while on the other hand they perceive Marsabit as an essential place for their ethnic groups. Thus, the polarisation south-north emerges for the Boranas too, even though it is not clearly visible in the space of Marsabit town. In the area of the town of Isiolo (Isiolo County) there is a well-known Borana community known as Waaso Borana[82]. The presence of pastoralists groups related each other in different counties and areas of Kenya is sign of the contiguity and fluidity of movements and livelihood patterns in a space experienced as open. Marsabit was, and in some how still is, a pivotal nod in the nomads cyclical routes north and southwards.

However, other dimensions go beyond the south-north polarisation offering space for contacts, relations and discourses that cross or circumvent vertical (and conflictual) ethnic divisions. They show that the "centre core" is shaped by both ethnic and "egalitarian" relations and that this double nature of the urban space makes it the moral and social centre in the county. Looking at the shop names, it is possible to identify a line that divides the market in two sides. On one side – northbound – the names of the shops refer mainly to places in Marsabit County and in Ethiopia, to the Islam tradition and to Gabra and Borana tradition. On the other hand – close to the *township*, the oldest side of the town – the names are mainly Swahili. This side is clearly the "down country people" corner of the town and reveals that Marsabit houses other identities different from the "native" ones. The dimensions that lie beyond the first polarisation we highlighted above show other connections and relations in the town. The south-north in/out movements in Marsabit shape the space according to the political and economic power of the main communities and conceal vertical relations and hierarchies, whereas trade and commerce in the heart of the market outline connections that cross them horizontally also thanks to the smaller communities that have an important role in the market space.

82. G. Dahl, *Suffering Grass: Subsistence and Society of Waso Borana*, Stockholm, Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology, 1979.

Looking at the maps of the centre of Marsabit, it is possible to recognize that the ethnic lines in the town are porous and flexible and that there is a high level of border sharing of space. At the same time, it is the space itself that reveals that the competition for power and resources is still high and it occupies the Marsabit discourses undercurrent, revealing as different sights to the space allow a deeper understanding of the town and the whole region as well.

Conclusion

The paper tries to figure out new ways of thinking and imagining urban space in order to gain a deeper understanding of the way subjects, individual and collective, share the space in town and to think of it as an "open" and "cosmopolitan" meeting point in a network of small and "mono-ethnic" villages. It is interesting to observe that Marsabit, a century after its birth, maintains a double nature. In a region where it is hard to survive and where nomadic pastoralism allowed native groups to cope with unpredictable ecological balances and cyclical ecological crisis, the urban space inherited the role that the green mountain played in the past: a meeting point or a "critical centre"[83] on nomadic trajectories. Furthermore, colonialism and urbanisation contributed to the change of Marsabit mountain's meaning; since the town was born it has represented a place of alterity, not just a dot on a map, the centre of "impossible things" in the pastoral "moving" experience. The double role of intersection and of alterity space connects the town to the colonial city functions of administrative and commercial centre. It is possible to recognize that Marsabit centre, seen from the "walker" perspective, is a space always under construction. Here, the pedestrian experiences the realm of relations and here it is possible to circumvent the vertical ethnic division of northern Kenya society. Not just the realm of interaction and of "coeval coexistence" but also a place where it is possible to imagine, to plan and to observe the change at work. Through both fluid and fixed relations, the urban space is imagined and built in continuous negotiations of the social meaning given to the space.

The city attracts and condensates ethnic relations through urban lines and polarisation. Yet, the "ethnopolitics" and its competition is something played in the political centre of the country, far from the northern "small town". Although narratives and everyday life seems to confirm it, maps show that relations, that used to be fluid in the past and that now are "territorialised" and crystalized on the space, shape the urban centre through official narratives but with everyday life circumvention too. Maps show that the space they reproduce is a space "in-so-far" and the relations that contribute to shape it are situational, objects of talks and everyday practices. I argue that thinking of the sociality of northern Kenya in

83. J.C. Wood, "Roads to Nowhere: Nomadic Understandings of Space and Ethnicity", in G. Schlee, E.E. Watson, eds., *Changing Identifications and Alliances in North-East Africa. Volume I: Ethiopia and Kenya*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2009, 225-240, 239.

terms of a "multitude of trajectories" can be a way to affirm the situational nature of ethnic identities and to recognize the political and economic dimension of ethnic conflict that affects the region and questions the "territorialized ethnicity" reproduced since colonial period.

By analysing the history of the city and in particular its first years of life, it is clear that it is the result of the initiative of external actors, traders and colonial officials, who carried out an action of control over the lives of human groups who lived in the region, also, and above all, through policies and actions that concerned space. In this panorama, the city is not only a place of otherness par excellence, but also a "dense" place for the subjectivities (individual and collective) that could find refuge and economic and social resources in it. The centre of attraction in the city is the market, the beating heart and dense area of urban space built and designed by the actors who access it every day.

Furthermore, it is useful and important to investigate how the urban space is lived through belongings that divide it and relationships that cross it, in an attempt to acknowledge their situational nature, the complementarity that distinguishes them and the constant negotiation of which they are the object. As states by Gufu Oba[84], to delve into the spatial dimension of ethnic relations may allow a better understanding of the actual reality of a region characterized by fragile political, economic and social balances. Moreover, spatial analysis and a relational approach to the urban environment allow to overcome the narratives and the lenses of analysis that have too often dominated the discourses about Northern Kenya as well as North-eastern Africa. Despite its "small size" and its "far away" nature, Marsabit deserves to be taken into account in order to question ethnicity and ethnic tribalism, which affect the whole region, and the political and economic marginalization of a wide part of Kenya and, in particular, of pastoral groups among the Kenyan population.

84. G. Oba, *Herder Warfare in East Africa: A Social and Spatial History*, Wirwick, The White Horse Press, 2017.