

ETHNICITY AND MIGRATION AMONG THE ARIAAL, KENYA

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This presentation analyses the long-term development of ethnicity and inter-ethnic migration among the Ariaal of northern Kenya. The Ariaal have often been represented as a classic example of a bicultural group, originating from two distinct ethnic groups, in this case, the Cushitic Rendille and the Nilotic Samburu, who speak a Maa dialect. To understand ethnicity among the Ariaal of northern Kenya, it is important to recognize that the binary logic underlying classical segmentary models is not capable of making distinctions between the multiple affinities associated with ethnic group or clan membership. Social formations, and thus ethnicity, are the result of historical processes, which have changed considerably over time.

The Ariaal, like other pastoral groups of northern Kenya, have actively responded to modern challenges through such means as migrating, changing ethnic affiliations, and modifying their pastoral economy and culture. Such responses were particularly in evidence during the colonial period. The colonial administration made no direct efforts to promote the pastoral economies of northern Kenya; in fact, the regime tried to separate “tribes” and impose limitations that reduced the mobility and the herding range of the Rendille camel pastoralists and Samburu cattle pastoralists. However, the presence of the colonial state had the unintended effect of promoting an internal market and of stimulating interethnic migrations among the Rendille, Ariaal, and Samburu. The colonial state reduced interethnic raiding considerably, as it held a monopoly on violence, to some degree. The Ariaal and Rendille no longer saw it necessary to avoid cattle raising, which, in the past, had the disadvantage of restricting their mobility in times of prolonged interethnic warfare. Thus, pacification during the colonial period contributed to increasing adjustment to the Samburu cattle economy and to the diversification of the pastoral economies of these groups. Informants generally hold that the first Ariaal began joining the cattle economy in the 1920s and 1930s. The Rendille followed this practice one or two decades later, so that, by the end of the colonial period, the bulk of the Ariaal and a considerable portion of the Rendille were engaged in mixed camel–cattle livelihoods. In addition, this change was accompanied by the growing significance of Ariaal ethnicity and interethnic migrations from the Rendille to the Ariaal and Samburu.

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