

Title

Belief and Belonging: Identity and Religion in Northern Kenya

What this Study Contributes

An investigation processes and effects of conversion to Christianity and Islam in northern Kenya and establishment of the viability of an interdisciplinary methodology - combining the work of anthropologists, archaeologists, geographers and historians - focussing on the relationships between belief, identity, and religious spaces, objects and texts as a means to explore a series of central questions:

1. What are the processes of religious 'conversion' in terms of how people modify and change their ritual behaviour?
2. How does the remaking of belief impact on peoples' senses of identity – both national and ethnic?
3. How are religious and conversion experiences related to movements through space, and across ethnic and national boundaries?
4. How does the remaking of these multiple forms of identity relate to changes in livelihood?
5. Have men and women experienced these processes of remaking in very different ways?

Team

Principal Investigator: Prof John Mack (East Anglia)

Research Staff: Dr Elizabeth Watson (Cambridge), Dr Hassan Arero (The British Museum)

University

University of East Anglia

Award

Phase 1 Small Grant £55,751

Research Partners

Dr Purity Kiura (National Museums of Kenya), Dr Fugicha Wako (Egerton University), Dr Justin Willis (British Institute in Eastern Africa)

Approach

The research combined archival and library research with life-history interviews, observation of practice and visits to a series of ritual sites (including mosques and churches) with measurement and mapping of those sites and collection of oral histories about them.

Findings

Project finished **30th September 2008**.

1. The changing relationship between identity and religion in this area can be understood in terms of changing pilgrimages – movements across a landscape which in themselves help to form people's sense of who they are, and how their identity is linked to a system of belief.
2. Until recently the Gabbra and Boran people lived mobile lives as herders, their patterns of movement tied to particular ritual sites. Recently, political conflicts and civil war have led many to adopt more settled lives as cultivators. Church and mosque have helped to create much more localised and every-day kinds of pilgrimage; the place of prayer is a local building rather than a tree, or hill or open space.
3. The Boran have converted to Islam, which has involved abandonment of traditional practices. The effect of this has not been a diminution of ethnic sentiment; instead; Islam has itself become the focus for a localised version of Boran identity, which no longer requires pilgrimages across a substantial distance. In contrast, the Gabbra have largely taken up Catholicism, a decision which they explain by saying local Catholic practice is tolerant of their continued involvement in traditional practices. Again, conversion to a nominally 'universal' religion has not blurred ethnic boundaries; indeed, the rapid spread of mosques and churches has been the prelude to a sustained period of inter-ethnic hostility between Gabbra and Boran.
4. Alongside this conversion to Christianity and Islam, goes the spread of *ayaana* – a spirit possession movement, less clearly associated with a particular ethnicity. *Ayaana* is frowned upon by Muslims and Christians, but is very popular – particularly among women, who play a prominent if not always a leading role in its activities. *Ayaana* has attracted both Boran and Gabbra followers, and has also created its own new ritual landscape, combining quotidian domestic practice with periodic attendance at special sacred sites where prayers and offerings are made.

Activities and Outcomes

- Workshop in Marsabit to present findings to local community, July 2008
- Exhibition at the newly refurbished Nairobi Museum, opened August 2008
- Public lecture in Nairobi, followed by informal discussion, September 2008

Further Information

http://www.biea.ac.uk/research_pages/biea_projects.html

