The fair and the sanctuary: gathering places in a nomadic landscape (Somaliland, 1000–1850 AD)

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ABSTRACT

Gathering places play a paramount role among pastoralists. Markets, sanctuaries, graves and watering places are foci of ritual, economic and social activity. They facilitate inter and intragroup relations, including trade, marriage arrangements, political alliances, conflict resolution ceremonies, the dispersal of news and religious activities. In this article the authors will explore two types of gathering places used by nomadic pastoralists in Somaliland during the second millennium AD: fairs and sacred sites. Relations between nomads and foreigners were negotiated in open, seasonal markets, whereas sanctuaries and graves facilitated relations among different clans. The case of Somaliland exemplifies well the social, economic and symbolic relevance of nomadic gathering places and their extraordinary resilience: while towns have an intermittent and chequered history in the country, ephemeral meeting places remained as key features in the landscape for hundreds of years.

KEYWORDS

Nomads; East Africa; long-distance trade; sacred places; pastoralism

1. Introduction

Gathering places play a paramount role among mobile peoples, such as pastoralists and hunter-gatherers. Among pastoral communities, markets, sanctuaries, graves and watering places – which are regularly visited but not settled permanently – become loci of intense ritual, economic and social activity. They are their only anchors in the landscape and for this reason the material and immaterial investment in them is often high. They facilitate inter and intragroup relations, including trade, marriage arrangements, political alliances, conflict resolution ceremonies, the dispersal of news and religious activities. In this paper we will explore gathering places used by nomadic pastoralists in Somaliland during the second millennium AD. Despite the seasonal and ephemeral occupation of such places, they were fundamental for the establishment of lasting and predictable relations among nomads and between locals and foreigners. Bonds among nomads were articulated mainly through sacred spaces (sanctuaries, graves), whereas contacts between nomads and foreigners were negotiated in seasonal fairs. Both fairs and sanctuaries were used only for brief periods of time every year but repeatedly and often through many centuries. The case of Somaliland exemplifies well both the relevance of seasonal gathering places among nomads and their extraordinary resilience: whereas towns, forts or caravan stations have an intermittent and chequered history in the country, meeting places remained as key features in the landscape for hundreds of years.
2. Nomads and gathering places

Pastoral societies, from purely nomadic to semi-sedentary, share some characteristics (Khazanov 1994). The way they conceptualize the landscape, for instance, shows great similarities across cultures. This is related to their mobility, which is in turn related to the physical nature of the territories that they inhabit. Nomadic and seminomadic pastoralists tend to live in harsh environments that require seasonal movements in search of green pastures and water (Cribb 1991). In addition, these environments are almost always deficient of certain goods that pastoralists have to obtain through exchanges with other groups and some believe that they cannot exist without an outer world (Khazanov 1994). This is not exactly true, as pure pastoralists are known to have led quite autonomous lives in prehistoric Asia, Africa and the Americas (Frachetti 2009; Nielsen 2009; Smith 2005) and complex pastoralist systems are known to have existed in the past independently of sedentary states (Honeychurch and Makarewicz 2016, 353). Yet it is also true that historic nomads and many prehistoric pastoralists (Sadr 1991) have developed symbiotic relations with settled communities, including long-distance trade networks with a variety of state and stateless societies (Brass 2015).

It is therefore not surprising that fairs and markets have been one of the main elements of nomadic landscapes. In the Middle East towns acted as market places for nomads since at least the first millennium BC (Bienkowski and van der Steen 2001; Schiettecate and Mouton 2014). In the Maghreb, on the contrary, fairs unrelated to urban centres have been historically dominant from Roman times onward (Shaw 1981). In both cases, they were located in liminal points and next to a main route connecting disparate zones and fulfilled economic, social and religious functions.

Markets, however, are only one element of nomadic landscapes. A role at least as important is played by sanctuaries and places of religious significance. Ritual places can adopt a variety of forms and sizes. In its most simple form, they can be a mere heap of stones (Nielsen 2009, 29; Wright 2007; Burton [1856] 1910, 133–4), which are foci of ritual activity located in important features of the landscape, such as mountain passes, crossroads and fords. More relevant for the present discussion are sanctuaries that are the scenario of ceremonies involving a number of people, often large crowds from different clans, lineages or groups. These are known archaeologically among many pastoralist communities (Allard and Erdenebaatar 2005; Wright 2007; Nielsen 2009; Hildebrand, Shea, and Grillo 2011). Sanctuaries often have a funerary nature and, in fact, monumental graves are another pivotal element in nomadic landscapes (e.g. Kennedy and Bishop 2011; Davies [2013]; Frachetti [2009, 161–5]). It would be misleading, however, to regard cemeteries or sanctuaries only as religious spaces. Nomads trade there, broker alliances, establish truces, arrange marriages, exchange news and so on (Bienkowski and van der Steen 2001, 32; Mustafa and Abu Tayeh 2014). Funerary ceremonies in themselves are important social occasions in which people from different clans gather, eat together and socialize. Cairns, sanctuaries and graves are often the only permanent structures built by nomadic pastoralists and therefore fix routes, facilitate spatial orientation and materialize the ancestral memory of a clan or tribe.

Fairs and sanctuaries represent anchors in the nomadic landscape, places of gathering that structure the sociality, temporality and spatiality of pastoralist communities. In harsh environments that are often unpredictable and dangerous, they offer a measure of security through their fixity and the recurrence of the activities that take place in them. These nodes we will call here interfacials and they can be of two types. They can articulate internal relations (pastoralists with pastoralists) or relations between the world of nomads and the outer world. Sanctuaries and graves (but also wells and springs) are internal interfacials. They facilitate relations among groups...
sharing the same cultural background, but belonging to different tribes, clans or subclans. Fairs, instead, are essentially interfacials of exteriority. They channel relations between groups from different, sometimes radically different, cultural and political milieus. These interfacials are social, because they enable interaction and exchange between different collectives of peoples and things, but they are also natural: they are invariably located in surfaces of contact, between land and sea, plains and mountains, arid and fertile areas. This is of course not a coincidence: social interfacials enable connections and connections occur best in places of least friction (mountain passes, fords) and where two different entities (geological, ecological) join at a specific point – such as land and sea.

3. Moving and gathering in the Horn

Symbiotic relations between nomads and non-nomads can be described as inter-ontological (rather than interethnic or multicultural), as they involve exchanges between communities that are radically other. Ontological difference is expressed along three dimensions: spatial; temporal; and political. Thus, nomadism implies a way of relating to landscape and time that is largely incommensurable with that of sedentariness. Paul Lane (2016), for instance, has noted that a focus on place, as opposed to paths, prevents us from grasping the specificity of pastoralist landscapes, which are characterized by mobility and transience. In the same way, an acephalous people conceives human relations in a way that is diametrically opposed to the perspective of those who live under a monarchy. Ontological diversity has been common in different areas of Sub-Saharan Africa for many centuries: hunters, pastoralists and cultivators, State and stateless people have often shared the same space (Stahl 2004; Kusimba and Kusimba 2005). In the case of the Horn of Africa, the interfacials of exteriority that we mentioned in the previous section serve to bring together these diverse ontologies and facilitate relations between them.

The origin of ontological difference in the Horn can probably be traced back to the Neolithic divide between pastoralists and hunters-gatherers-fishers. Archaeological data are scant at the moment, but we found a large shell midden in the place of Ceel Gerdi (Berbera), which was occupied by people exploiting marine resources. Although we do not have a firm chronology for the site, the materials point towards a late Neolithic or Iron Age chronology (second–first millennium BC), a period when pastoralists already dominated the Somali landscape (Lesur et al. 2014). Another level of alterity was added with the arrival of Egyptian sailors during the mid-second millennium BC (Ward and Zazzaro 2010) and then on a regular basis from the first century BC onwards, as proved by a variety of Hellenistic, Roman and Sassanian finds along the northern Somali coast (Chittick 1979; Smith and Wright 1988; Desanges 1993) and several literary references from the first to the sixth century AD. Somaliland became fully part of the medieval Indian Ocean network after 1000 AD, when evidence of trade from China, India, Persia and Arabia becomes abundant (González-Ruibal et al. 2017). The participation of the region in long-distance networks of exchange is strongly related to the emergence of sedentary settlements, often called ‘towns’, which add another layer of ontological complexity to the country (Curle 1937; Mire 2015a). Their origin is unclear, but their heyday coincides with the Ifat and Adal Sultanates (thirteenth–sixteenth centuries) (Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch 2004; González-Ruibal et al. 2017). Merchants, town-dwellers, nomads and foragers structured their being along different temporal and spatial axes, but they were all dependent on the climate and geography of Somaliland.

There are three well differentiated areas in the country, named Guban, Ogo and Haud. The first corresponds with the desert coastal plain, running from Djibouti to Cape Guardafui, the tip of the Horn of Africa (Hornby 1907, 3). It is a dry area which only receives scattered rain during the relatively
cool months of October to March. However, numerous *tug* (seasonally dry riverbeds) cross the coastal plain. It is possible to find water in them by digging wells under the sandy topsoil (Lewis 1999, 33).

Behind the Guban lie a series of mountain ranges generically named Ogo. The Ogo highlands extend southwards from the escarpments which mark the limit with the Guban to the border with Ethiopia, and run parallel to the coast. To the south, the highlands slope down gradually to the Haud, a plateau which is the main grazing area of Somaliland and a key zone in the seasonal movements of the pastoralists. Regardless of these geographical specificities, the environment in Somaliland is mostly a semi-desert with poor and uneven rainfall rates and vegetation reduced to scrub bushes and acacias. In this context, the key for the pastoralists’ survival is an adequate strategy of seasonal movements that allow them to take advantage of this challenging environment. This strategy is in turn directly related to the weather, which has four seasons (Hornby 1907, 75).

The seasonal movements that characterize nomadic life in Somaliland also have a strong effect on one of the key activities in the region: long-distance trade. Trading along the coast of Somaliland happens during the October–December rainy season (*dayr*) and the January–April dry season (*jiilal*) (Hornby 1907, 87). During this period, pastoralists are wintering on the coast, while at the same time the northeast monsoon allows easy access for sailors to that same coast. According to fifteenth-century sailor Ibn Majid, ships aimed for India should leave Somaliland by the 11th of May (Tibbetts 1971, 225). Other merchants were coming from the interior, from the towns of Ethiopia. According to the records of historical periods (Hornby 1907, 61), long-distance caravans arrived at the coast in September and left in April–May.

Therefore, a confluence of factors made the period between October and April an optimal time for trade: the ships leaving for India would meet those returning to the Red Sea; the pastoralists temporarily based in the mountains would come back to the coast and occupy their home wells, and the caravans coming from the towns inland would start their annual trip to the coast (Figure 1).

4. Fairs

Merchants and nomads met in two places in Somaliland: beach markets and fairs near caravan stations and possibly towns (González-Ruibal et al. 2017). The main interfacials of exteriority were doubtless the beach markets held in several places along the coast (Figure 2). The harbouring qualities of this coast are generally poor. At the beginning of the twentieth century, only three places could be considered ports: Zeila, Bulhar and Berbera, of which only Berbera could accept vessels in all seasons, including large ships (Hornby 1907, 29–31). In addition to these three places, there were a limited number of stations along the coast where water was available and small boats could be unloaded. Significantly, three of these minor sites have yielded relevant archaeological materials: Siyaara (which will be discussed later), Maydh and Heis (Xiis), where the oldest evidence of trade in Somaliland has been documented so far (Desanges 1993). Despite their limitations, these ports became the main meeting places in Somaliland between sailors, caravanners and pastoralists.

4.1. Characterizing fairs

During our research, we studied the remains of three sites that can be identified with seasonal fairs: Siyaara; Farhad (in the outskirts of Berbera); and Bulhar. Although they cover a long period of time (from the early second millennium AD to the early twentieth century), they have several traits in common.
First, they are located in natural interfacials that facilitate communication and are conspicuous. Berbera, as we have noted, has the only good natural harbour of the region and the fair that we found, Farhad, lies at the feet of an isolated and prominent hill. Siyaara also has acceptable harbour conditions, but perhaps even more important is the fact that it is located

**Figure 1.** Map of the seasonal displacements of nomads and merchants in Somaliland.

Dayr (October-December): Rain, mostly on the coast
Jilib (December-April): Very dry, harsh conditions
Northeast Monsoon: Generally steady wind,
3 Groups move progressively towards home-wells (October-November)
4 Wintering at home wells (December-April)
5 Ships arriving from Asia (October-April)
6 Ships arriving to Somaliland and leaving for Asia (May at the latest)
7 Caravans arriving to the coast (September-April)
at the foot of a large and very distinct rocky promontory that is visible for a long distance both from the sea and from the interior. Bulhar, in turn, lies at the mouth of the Issutugan, the major seasonal river (tug) of western Somaliland, which is the main natural route to the interior of the country (Figure 3). Second, they have water all year round, either in situ or in the vicinities, which is essential if they are to sustain a large population if only for some months. Third, they lacked an urban character for most of its history. Bulhar only became a town in the 1870s; Siyaara was always occupied seasonally with only a couple of permanent structures, and Berbera was described still in the mid-nineteenth century as an open market with virtually no substantial buildings. Even if the place developed as a permanent settlement at different times of its history (during the Adal Sultanate and during the late nineteenth century), the fair was always conducted outside the city. The only trading centre that existed as a town in the long term was Zeila, located next to Djibouti (Fauvelle-Aymar et al. 2011). This situation is quite unique in the panorama of the Indian Ocean network, where trade was mainly conducted in gateway towns or ports of trade, from the Swahili coast to China (Horton and Middleton 2000). The conspicuous lack of monumentality had already struck early European travellers in the region (Cruttenden 1849, 54).

Lieutenant J.C. Cruttenden left us an excellent description of the Berbera market that can be used to understand the situation in older periods (Cruttenden 1849, 54–5):

Figure 2. Map of the study area in west-central Somaliland with main sites described in the text and optimal natural routes leading from the interior to the coast. Black dots represent funerary monuments.
The annual fair is one of the most interesting sights, if only from the fact of so many different and distant tribes being drawn together for a short time, to be again scattered in all directions . . . the place, from April to the early part of October, was utterly deserted, not even a fisherman being found there; but no sooner did the season change, than the inland tribes commenced moving down towards the coast, and preparing their huts for their expected visitors.

At the time of his visit merchants came from Ethiopia, Yemen, Oman, Ras al-Khaimah, Bahrein, Iraq, Iran and India. He noted that there was no chief organizing the market and the rules that prevailed were those of the local nomads. Cruttenden writes:

By the first week in April, Berbera is again deserted, nothing being left to mark the site of a town lately containing 20,000 inhabitants, beyond bones of slaughtered camels and sheep, and the framework of a few huts carefully piled on the beach in readiness for the ensuing year.

The trading sites that we have found during our fieldwork match Cruttenden’s description quite well, as we will now see.

4.2. Three coastal fairs

Farhad is located three kilometres south of Berbera. The place extends at the foot of a rocky hill, whose Persian name is probably ancient. The outcrop is very prominent in the landscape and serves as a navigational device for both ships and caravans (Red Sea Pilot 1900, 380). The fair occupied around five hectares of flat, sandy land to the south of the outcrop (Figure 3), as well as its foothills, and is today littered with thousands of pottery sherds (mostly imported wares, store jars and containers), incense burners, glass bangles, perfume bottles, stone vessels, animal bones (mostly caprines) and seashells. No permanent structure seems to have existed in the plain at any point. A shovel test, however, allowed us to identify a large hearth with charcoal, faunal remains and minute fragments of imported pottery and glass – a temporary camping area.

Regarding the chronology and provenance of the materials, the oldest finds are some Egyptian or Syrian moulded wares that appeared on the foothills and that can be dated to the twelfth–thirteenth centuries, as well as a few fragments of Yemeni Yellow ware (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries) and Indian
kitchenware. Yet the bulk of the material dates to between the fourteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which coincide with the Adal Sultanate (1415–1577) (Figure 4). It includes a large amount of blue and white Ming porcelain from China; glazed stoneware jars from Southeast Asia (Martaban); glazed and painted wares from Persia; and other pottery from Egypt, India and Yemen. Many glass bangles and perfume bottles have been found, too. Some local ceramics, similar to the kind found in nomadic burial sites and towns of the same period, were also documented. Like Berbera in the nineteenth century, this was a multicultural meeting ground where people from a variety of regions (India, Persia and the Arabian Peninsula, as well as local pastoralists and town-dwellers) gathered and traded. It was an ephemeral place with no substantial constructions, which was inhabited only seasonally.

Siyaara, 33 km to the east of Farhad as the crow flies, provides more information about the nature of these gathering places. The site is much larger, with an artefact scatter covering around 12 hectares (Figure 5), and is related to the history of the Islamization of Somaliland. According to local lore (Burton [1856] 1910, 80), the place was ruled c.1266 by an infidel chief, a magician, who was routed by two holymen from Arabia. This might be an allegory for the arrival of Muslim missionaries to the region around those dates. The name Siyaara, in fact, is in all likelihood related to the word siyaaro (pl. siyaaroyin), which refers to the annual pilgrimage to a holy site where the ancestor of a clan or a saint is buried (Lewis 1998, 80). There is a large cairn near the beach surrounded by a dense artefact scatter (4 in the map) that could have been the focus of ritual activity. The magician of the folk tale, in fact, was buried inside a hill by the Muslim holymen, so it would not be strange that the hill stands for a pre-Islamic mound. Evidence of ritual activities carried out in Siyaara are the remains of several incense burners in clay and stone.

Siyaara, like Farhad, is mostly devoid of buildings. There are two rectangular structures made of coral blocks and a few isolated mounds, some of which may conceal buildings inside. There is also a large Muslim cemetery and other minor clusters of graves, in addition to the pre-Islamic tumulus already mentioned. All the space in between these graves and mounds is littered with archaeological materials, including pottery, stone vessels, glass containers, bracelets, beads, spindle whorls and a large volume of faunal remains (predominately caprines) with slaughter marks. In many places there are clear concentrations of artefacts and, particularly, bones. They probably indicate camping sites, where members from the same clan or family gathered.

Regarding the chronology and provenance of the imported materials, the Adalite period is well represented as in Farhad, but here we have many older items, going down to the twelfth century if not before. The older remains come from the area around the pre-Islamic cairn and include numerous fragments of Indian kitchen and tableware, Yemeni pottery (mostly storage jars and some Mustard ware), Chinese celadons, and a few Iranian sgraffiato glass vessels, all of which can be dated between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries AD. Elsewhere, the assemblage is dominated by Persian productions and Chinese Blue-and-White porcelains (fourteenth–seventeenth century). Other imports comprise beads, perfume bottles and dozens of polychrome glass bangles. Similar imported materials have been found in contemporary Ethiopian sites located over 400 km inland (Insoll 2017), thus confirming the final destination of the caravans. Local pottery is more common than in Farhad, but still much less abundant than imported wares (Figure 6). This is consistent with the nomadic character of the local populations participating in the trade, which made little use of ceramics.

Finally, Bulhar was a nomadic gathering place that was sealed under a late nineteenth-century colonial town (Torres et al. 2017). Excavations at the site offered a glimpse at its pre-urban history, which was characterized by repeated pastoralist occupations. Traces of them are post holes from temporary huts, pits, hearths, remains of banqueting (as dense concentrations of caprine and camel bones), and a few fragments of pottery, including some incense burners. Evidence of long-distance trade in Bulhar
Figure 4. Persian pottery (fourteenth–seventeenth century AD) and glass bracelets from Farhad.
Figure 5. Map of Siyaara. 1: enclosure made of coral blocks; 2–3: buildings made of coral blocks; 4. Pre-Islamic mound.
predating the construction of the town comprise abundant fragments of Chinese and Japanese porcelains of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and glass bracelets (Torres et al. 2017). Bulhar was also a pilgrimage destination: there are two mausolea dedicated to two prominent sheikhs. Around the tomb of one of them (Sheikh Seberein) we collected numerous bones of juvenile caprines and two incense burners (González-Ruibal et al. 2017, 147), evidence of ritual gatherings and banqueting.

4.3. The fair as an open gathering place

The archaeological remains of the fairs reveal similar practices carried out throughout the second millennium AD: not just trading, but also feasting, socializing and the celebration of ritual
activities. Foreign merchants likely resided temporarily in or around the markets, as in the nineteenth century, but it was pastoralists who had the upper hand. The strongest argument for the leading role of nomads in the beach markets is the fact that they never evolved into cities. They remained as durable but materially insubstantial interfacials in the landscape: open, ephemeral places of trade that welcomed everybody, but refused appropriation and enclosing. Their lack of infrastructure favoured a fluid and transient geography of trade. Nomads could move unexpectedly and drag the business with them. Part of the trade in Berbera, for example, was displaced to Bulhar in the mid-nineteenth century, when one clan decided to move after conflict with another (Cruttenden 1849, 51). This can be interpreted as a mechanism of resistance against centralization, which would also explain the failure of the urban experience in Somaliland. Fairs allowed nomads to fulfil their needs for contact and exchange with others without falling into the traps of state and foreign dominance. Towns only replaced open markets with the arrival of the colonial powers during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

5. Sanctuaries

Despite the ceremonial element present in fairs, the ritual places par excellence were the sanctuaries, which acted as sites of aggregation for the nomadic communities. Several of these sanctuaries must have existed across the Somali landscape. They were always located in strategic points, often crossroads or mountain passes, along the main routes between coast and interior. Some of these ritual spaces were of local relevance, while others had a suprarregional area of influence and probably attracted members from many different clans. In all cases they seem to have emerged originally as cemeteries. The best example documented to date is Iskudar (González-Ruibal et al. 2017, 162–7).

5.1. Iskudar: a site of pilgrimage and religious gathering

The site is located in a physical interfacial – in the escarpment that separates the highlands (Ogo) and the coastal plain (Guban). A GIS analysis showed that the site is located at a crossroads of optimal routes between coast and interior (González-Ruibal et al. 2017: fig. 23). It is thus an ideal meeting place for pastoralists coming from any of those areas during their seasonal migrations. In fact, the name iskudar in Somali means ‘aggregation’, ‘mixing’ or ‘combination’.

The main site is an enclosure comprising three hectares (Figure 7). It is surrounded by a low perimeter wall of almost 700 metres, with slabs stuck vertically at regular intervals. It probably had many gates, of which three survive: one in the north, another in the south; and a third in the west. They roughly coincide with the main natural routes leading to the site. Iskudar has been affected by severe post-depositional processes, but it is still possible to identify many structures, both inside and outside the enclosure. This includes a variety of funerary monuments: large cairns, stone rings with small cairns or cists inside, cruciform tombs and clusters of cists. All burials seem to be pre-Islamic or at least different to prevailing Islamic custom, because the orientation differs (E–W) from that of the few clearly modern graves present in the site (NNW, that is, pointing toward Mecca). The varied typology of the funerary monuments may be related to chronology, status or clan identity.

Cruciform tombs are the rarest. Only two have been found. They are made of vertical slabs stuck on the ground forming a segmented Greek cross and have two 1.5 m tall stelae, one in the east side and the other one in the west, thus marking the orientation of the grave. The most common tombs inside the perimeter are either cairns or cists surrounded by a stone ring, which is a very common type of funerary monument in Somaliland (Cros et al. 2017). Outside the site,
hundreds of tombs flank the routes leading to Iskudar. They are mostly large cairns and stone rings, but there are also some cist clusters and two cruciform burials. All the burials are located along the optimal natural routes between coast and interior.

The survey of the site furnished very few finds. These consist in a dozen hand-made pottery sherds similar to those documented in medieval towns of the region, two incense burners, and half a dozen undiagnostic wheel-turned sherds (including a rim of Indian kitchen ware). The most remarkable find is a fragment of an Egyptian marvered glass unguentarium (twelfth–thirteenth centuries AD). The scarcity of pottery is again consistent with a nomadic population.

Several test pits were conducted in an area of cairns enclosed by stone rings. Erosion here had exposed a layer of bones, charcoal, ashes, cowries, some local pottery, a couple of wheel-turned
sherds and a small marine shell bead probably associated with two funerary monuments. The excavations exposed a layer of bones and ashes lying flat on an original floor of compacted sand that was only 15 to 20 cm under the present surface, with a few pottery sherds including an almost complete incense burner. More faunal remains and pottery were found in burrows dug within the perimeter of a relatively well preserved stone ring with a central cairn located further to the north (Locus 6). A total of 733 bones were found, with a clear predominance of caprines both goats (Capra hircus) and sheep (Ovis aries) in similar proportions, including juveniles. Bovines are the second best represented taxa. Other, rarer, animals include dromedary (Camelus dromedarius), equid and gazelle. The bones show traces of butchery and consumption. Two charcoal samples were dated between the mid-twelfth century and the late fourteenth century AD. The dates do not overlap, which means that the area saw repeated gatherings and ritual activities through several generations, involving the sacrifice and consumption of domestic and wild animals.

5.2. Pilgrimage sites in a time of change

The site of Iskudar can be interpreted in light of the siyaaro, mentioned in the previous section. As we saw, the siyaaro is an annual pilgrimage to a holy place, usually the tomb of a saint or a sheikh considered to be the ancestor of a clan. The most important place of pilgrimage in Somaliland today is the shrine of Aw-Barkhadle, who is considered one of the first Muslim missionaries to have arrived in the country during the twelfth or thirteenth century (Lewis 1998: Ch. 7; Mire 2015b). His siyaaro still attracted several thousand pilgrims from all over the northern regions in the 1950s and 1960s (Lewis 1998, 89–98) and large numbers of livestock were killed for the feasting during the celebrations. Siyaaroyin often involve dances, recitation (dhikr), meditation, collective prayer and the distribution of charity. People participating in the pilgrimage also ask for rain and fertility (Mire 2015b, 101). Likewise, we can infer that nomads from different areas came to Iskudar through pilgrimage routes – marked by cairns and other kinds of tombs. There, they buried and honoured their dead and performed ceremonies that included the collective consumption of animals and the burning of incense. The slaughter of valuable animals, such as juveniles and camels, indicates the important investment made in these feasts. They probably conducted other social transactions (marriages, trade, rites of passage?) and exchanged news, as known in similar contexts (Newton 2007; Mustafa and Abu Tayeh 2014). Although these nomads were already participating in long-distance trade networks, imported materials played a negligible role in the ceremonies.

It is worth noting that the dating of Iskudar coincides with the spread of Islam in Somaliland during the twelfth–thirteenth centuries AD, as transmitted by oral tradition and generally accepted by historians (Fauvelle-Aymar et al. 2011). We argue that Iskudar is a site of intensified rituality and social interaction in a time of dramatic cultural change. It is not only that a new religion is being introduced; it is also that for the first time Somaliland becomes part of a State – the Sultanate of Ifat (1285–1415). Gathering places often played a paramount role during times of outstanding political, economic and cultural changes (Thomas 1996, 233; Hildebrand, Shea, and Grillo 2011, 197; Dietrich et al. 2012). Through feasting and ritual, they helped negotiate often traumatic transitions.

We know that the people of Iskudar were in touch with Muslim merchants and they may have been adopting Islamic customs already, but the place itself and the rituals were still basically, if not fully, pagan. Nevertheless, the Sufi tradition of East Africa (to which the siyaaro belongs) is quite tolerant and open and had no problem in incorporating previous practices to the Islamic faith. Sufi is a popular expression of mystical Islam. As the new faith spread, it took the form of organized
communities (*tariqat*), which gathered around a religious master (*sheikh*) (Insoll 2001, 252–4). Their tombs became places of worship and pilgrimage. Lewis (1998, 30) has noted that a similar concept of power in Cushitic and Sufi traditions helped the transfiguration of clan founders into Islamic saints: in both cases ancestors/founders are venerated and are considered to have power (*baraka*), which is sought by worshippers pilgrimaging to the site. What we might be seeing in Iskudar, then, is a precedent of the *siyaaro* – still faithful to its pre-Islamic roots. Instead of visiting the tombs of sheikhs and saints, nomads were participating in annual pilgrimages to the burial place of clan ancestors, the most important of whom might have been buried in the rare cruciform tombs. The abandoning of the sanctuary probably coincides with the rise of Adal and the hegemony of Islam from the fifteenth century onward.

While Iskudar was probably abandoned before Islam prevailed, other pre-Islamic sites of gathering were assimilated into the new faith through Sufi practices. An excellent example is provided by Dobo Geed Haadad near Bulhar. The place is located again at a physical interfacial: next to a ford that crosses a wide tug and near the limit of the escarpment that divides the coastal plain and the highlands. Here we documented a lonely pre-Islamic cist grave, three cairns, in one of which we found a human skeleton radiocarbon-dated to the tenth century AD² (when the first Arab sailors started to trade in the coast), two recent Islamic graveyards and an ancient mosque, marked by a simple line of boulders on the ground. Near the mosque it is possible to see the foundations of a hut of the kind common in places of Sufi worship. Members of Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqat*) spend time in these huts praying and meditating. The site of Dobo Geed Haadad shows the persistence of some of these gathering places as anchors in the nomadic landscape: unlike Iskudar, it made a successful transition to the new religious order, fulfilling a similar function for several centuries. In fact, it was in ritual places like this where the new faith was gradually incorporated: they made easier the transition between the pre-Islamic and the Islamic worldviews.

6. Conclusions

In this article we have argued that ritual and trading spaces are crucial in structuring nomadic landscapes. They tend to be located at natural interfacials that facilitate the meeting of people from different groups, often coming from very distant locations. We have examined here the fairs and sanctuaries of Somaliland during the second millennium AD using new data coming from recent fieldwork in the region. Before the active participation of Somaliland in the Indian Ocean network, places of exchange and ritual already existed. However, the deep involvement of the region in a world-system from c.1000 AD onwards implied dramatic changes, such as the introduction of new customs, the establishment of towns and permanent settlements, the arrival of a new religion and the emergence of the State. We have argued here that such important changes were negotiated, assimilated and in many ways resisted through places of gathering that remained largely under the control of the local nomadic populations. Such places were interfacials that allowed interactions between locals and foreigners and among locals. While they could not stop change, they allowed the indigenous communities to adapt it to their specific values, temporal rhythms and worldviews.

Open fairs, which largely resisted urbanization, were the main interfacial of exteriority, that is, the site where exchanges took place between nomads and merchants. These merchants, coming from Yemen, the Persian Gulf and other regions, were in many ways radical others to the nomads (and vice versa). The neutral ground of the fair, which was never bounded or built up, facilitated exchanges among communities that were ontologically diverse. Sanctuaries, in turn, buttressed relations among pastoralists during a time of accelerated transformation and social disruption. Collective pilgrimages
to the tombs of notable ancestors (*siyaaroyin*), which were perfectly in tune with the mobile nature of pastoralists and their funerary traditions, were assimilated by Islam and persist to this date.

A further lesson that can be extracted from the case studies presented above has to do with the tension between ephemerality, monumentality and duration. Places that are only used seasonally are not necessarily short lived and this is a lesson that surely applies in other contexts. Fair sites like Farhad or Siyaara remained active for several centuries, without ever developing a solid infrastructure. Likewise, complex monumental sites do not require all-year-round occupation or use. This has been observed ethnographically in pilgrimage towns in Yemen, which remain virtually empty most of the year (Newton 2007) and it was probably the case with funerary sanctuaries of Somaliland. At stake here are experiences of time, movement, place and sociality typical of nomadic peoples, whose landscapes differ markedly, even ontologically, from those of sedentary communities.

**Notes**

1. Locus 3: 827 ± 24 BP (D-AMS-015990, cal. AD 1166–1260); Locus 5: 663 ± 20 BP (D-AMS-015991, cal. AD 1276–1393).
2. 902–1025 cal. AD 1050 ± 23 BP (D-AMS 027669).

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