

THE ILEMI TRIANGLE

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It should come as no surprise that in the twentieth century the Sudan has experienced numerous disputes about its boundaries. It is the largest country in Africa, almost a million square miles, the size of the United States east of the Mississippi with long, poorly delimited borders. Throughout its modern history in the nineteenth and twenty centuries no central government in Khartoum—Turk, British, or Sudanese—has effectively controlled, let alone administered, its extensive frontiers let alone its very remote corners--Ma'tan al-Sarra , Halayib, and Ilemi. Each of them is as far from one another as from the center, but the contentious disputes over their sovereignty share common characteristics.

Each corner territory is a triangle. Each triangle is absolutely worthless except to its nomadic inhabitants. Each triangular dispute was but a symbol of larger issues that had little to do with their sand, scrub, or arid pastures. The Sara Triangle in the northwest corner of the Sudan was demanded by Mussolini as Italy's inheritance from Turkey and a strategic link in his imperial vision for Italian Northeast Africa. The British, about to abandon Ethiopia, were not prepared to quibble over degraded sand, and on 20 July 1934 Mussolini acquired more of the Sahara for Libya. The Halayib Triangle was a Sudanese administrative boundary of the wastelands overlooking the Red Sea above the Egyptian-Sudanese international boundary at the 22nd parallel. The sovereignty of the triangle flared up in 1956 and 1978, but in 1992 Egypt forcibly contested the Sudan's administration of the triangle and promptly "annexed" it. The Sudanese press called for war, but the Khartoum government was content to supinely declare that Egypt had illegally annexed the

disputed border territory and did nothing. Hasan al-Turabi summed up the real issue of the Halayib Triangle as merely “a small piece of land which would add nothing to either Egypt or Sudan. It is only being used as a pretext to create tension in the relations because Egypt wants to display its superiority over Sudan.”² The dispute over the Ilemi Triangle in southeastern Sudan was more complicated.

Ilemi was a triangular piece of arid hilly terrain named after the Anuak Chief Ilemi Akwon and bordering on Ethiopia and Kenya. Its elastic size varied between 4,000 and 5,400 square miles depending on the year and the surveyor. British imperial officials had no interest in the “light soil” of Ilemi except to promote their territorial ambitions by drawing arbitrary lines on maps. Their wandering subjects, however, regarded its wells and dry-season pastures essential to their survival and worth dying for. In the heart of Ilemi live the nomadic Turkana who move back and forth between the Sudan and Kenya. Surrounding them west to east are the Didinga and Topasa from the Sudan who graze their cattle, sheep, and goats for eight months on the western pastures of Ilemi, the Nyangatom from the Sudan and Ethiopia who oscillate across its northeastern border, and the Dassanetch who come out of the east from Ethiopia which did have imperial ambitions in the Ilemi Triangle. During their patterns of transhumance these pastoral people interacted with one another to trade and graze that often involved elaborate intercommunity agreements. When these arrangements broke down in competition for scarce resources, grass and water, the traditional response was the *razzia* that was not simply for the acquisition of animal wealth but culturally a rite of passage for young warriors, a strategy for dealing with natural disasters, or a means of improving the quality of livestock. These raids were initiated and regulated by the council of elders, but with the introduction of large numbers of firearms from Ethiopia at the end of the nineteenth century their authority was deeply eroded by the younger men who obtained the guns.

After the defeat of the Mahdist State in 1898 and the declaration of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium in 1899 there was no rush to define the boundaries of the vast Sudan except with Ethiopia in order to secure the Nile waters and contain the imperial ambitions of the emperor Menelik II to expand his empire deep into southern Ethiopia. He claimed all the territory to the southern tip of Lake Turkana, which he called the Samburu Sea, and proposed that Ethiopia's boundary with British East Africa should be drawn from there to the Indian Ocean. Having withstood the demands by three European powers for territory in the Nile basin, Great Britain was not about to surrender the northern region of British East Africa to Menelik. Captain Philip Maud of the Royal Engineers delimited the "Maud Line" in 1902-03, consummated in a vague treaty in 1907, that became in fact the Kenya-Ethiopian border, latter known as the 1914 Line, but did not stop Ethiopian imperialism. With Menelik's tacit approval Ethiopian slavers and gunrunners operating from Maji roamed with impunity into Kenya and the southern Sudan and in return for ivory and livestock armed the Nyangatom and Dassanetch in Ethiopia who crossed the undelimited border into Ilemi. The large numbers of arms produced by the First World War transformed the traditional *razzia* of the Ilemi nomads into violent confrontations during which hundreds of people were killed and thousands head of livestock were taken in a single raid.

In 1913 the British authorities in Uganda and the Sudan finally decided to rectify the existing border drawn arbitrarily on a map in 1902 along the parallel of 5° north latitude from the Nile east to the Omo River, the Maud Line, that did not remotely reflect the patterns of transhumance and cultivation by the Africans on the frontier. The Kelly-Tufnell expedition of 1913 worked assiduously in the verdant hill country east of the Nile as far as Mt. Mogilla where they abandoned their survey and, as so many Europeans have done in the past, drew a straight line beginning north of Mt. Mogilla eastward for a 100 miles to a point north of Mt. Labur and then to

Lake Rudolf along 4° 37' north latitude. This arbitrary delimitation left the traditional territory of the Turkana to be administered by Uganda while reserving for the Sudan access to Sanderson Gulf and Lake Rudolf. Known as the 1914 Line it remains the recognized international border to this day. Not having traversed the territory east of Mt. Mogilla, the commission recommended that when close administration was established in the region, the boundary should be reconsidered to reflect the actual grazing grounds of the nomadic Turkana. "The Sudan Government subscribes to the principle that the whole of the grazing grounds of the Turkana, properly so-called, shall be included in Uganda, provided that in any case the right of the Sudan of free access to a navigable port on Lake Rudolf is secured."³ It was assumed that the 1914 Line would be amended to accommodate the reality of local circumstances when the true limit of Turkana grazing was known.

In April 1924 representatives of the Sudan, Uganda, and Kenya convened at Kitgum in Uganda to discuss their outstanding border problems that perhaps would require a rectification of the frontier. At Kitgum the Ilemi Triangle became a territorial reality drawn on a map. The representatives of Uganda and Kenya sought to persuade those from the Sudan to redraw the boundary to include the northern limits of the Turkana grazing grounds across the 1914 Line ceding the territory either to Uganda or Kenya that would enable them to provide protection for the Turkana. Everyone agreed that this was the logical solution, for the Sudan had no interest in administering this remote region. The British, however, had no authority to surrender unilaterally Sudanese territory without the consent of its co-domini, Egypt, that would only introduce yet another cantankerous issue in the bitter and hostile relations between Britain and Egypt over the Sudan. In 1924 Egyptian nationalists had assassinated the British governor-general of the Sudan and provoked a mutiny of the Egyptian army in Khartoum that led to the forced repatriation of Egyptians from the Sudan.

On 1 February 1926, the Rudolf Province of Uganda was transferred to the Kenya Colony and with it the unresolved Turkana and boundary problems of Ilemi that had plagued the Ugandan officials. Kenya requested the Sudan to extend its military administration into the region north of the 1914 Line to protect the now disarmed Turkana during their dry season migration. The Sudan rejected this proposal because this remote and turbulent region could only be administered at great expense to the Sudan in order to protect Kenyan subjects from Ethiopian raiders. In 1928 Kenya was given permission by the Sudan to send military units from their new post at Lokitaung across the 1914 Line in “hot pursuit” in order to protect the Turkana and punish Dassanetch and Nyangatom raiders. Units of the King’s African Rifles (KAR) thereafter moved north of the 1914 Line in the dry season and successfully protected the Turkana at a cost of some £30,000 annually which was an extraordinary financial burden on the Kenya treasury. After all, if the Sudan would simply occupy and administer its own territory the problem would cease to exist.

In October 1929 British officials in Khartoum suggested to their Kenyan counterparts that they might allow the KAR to establish a military post on the Sudan side of the border to which they might make a financial contribution to its maintenance. Kenya readily agreed and immediately proposed a Sudanese subsidy of £20,000 for roads and telegraph and another £10,000 annually for the maintenance of the garrison. The Foreign Office brought pressure on British officials in Khartoum to either pay-up or to occupy the Triangle. They first chose to occupy assuming it would be cheaper than the demands by Kenya for cash. The Sudan’s effort to administer Ilemi was short lived. The preliminary expedition reported that the territory “appears entirely useless. It would grow nothing and could never support a population. Water is practically non-existent and other grazing is poor. It is intensely hot and shadeless. Cotton soil, thorn bush, straw-like grass and open mud flats comprise the whole country.”⁴ Add to that description the parched and desolate track that made up

the supply and communication line from the Nile that convinced the Sudan to subsidize the occupation of the region by Kenya. In 1931 Khartoum agreed to contribute £10,000 for two years plus an initial lump sum payment of £5,550 for roads and infrastructure to and within the Ilemi Triangle. They got off cheap.

In 1931 the District Commissioners from Kenya's Turkana District and Mongalla Province in the Sudan came to an informal agreement defining the traditional grazing grounds of the Turkana in the Ilemi Triangle. This line was then drawn in red on the existing maps. The informal line represented the northern limits of Turkana grazing and therefore the authority of the Kenya government. The Red Line, sometimes referred to as the Glenday Line after the DC from Kenya, represented no change in the existing international boundary which had been established in 1914. Furthermore, it was quite clear that the Governor of Kenya had no desire to change the boundary. "I am unable to agree to any extension of this colony's frontier with Ethiopia nor do I propose any revision of the Sudan-Kenya boundary."⁵ A few months later in 1932 another line, this time green in color, was drawn even further north that allowed the Turkana access to pastures and waterholes where the Dassanetch and Nyangatom thought they had established rights. Although the Sudan was cautious of Kenyan imperialism, these lines had no standing in international law and were simply delineated on various maps to illustrate the limits to which Kenya could extend its provisional administration.

The indulgence of Great Britain to the Italian conquest of Ethiopia in 1936 did not extend in the following year to Italian designs on Ilemi. Since the Ethiopian Dessanetch were indigenous residents of the Triangle, now subjects of the Italian empire, their rights to their ancestral home had presumably reverted to Italy which promptly established frontier posts along the Ethiopian frontier within the Sudan and Kenya. To settle this elusive eastern boundary, the Sudanese authorities with

the support of the Foreign Office sought a major rectification of the border between Italian East African and the Sudan by a swap of the eastern Ilemi Triangle to Italian Ethiopia in return for the Baro Salient below Gambila to the Sudan. First proposed in 1913 the exchange would enable the Sudan to administer all the Nuer and Anuak below the Ethiopian escarpment but not infringe upon the Turkana's grazing rights in Ilemi. In 1938 the northern limit of Turkana grazing was carefully delimited by a Sudan-Kenya joint commission that readjusted the Red Line eastward now known as "The Wakefield Line" after R.C. Wakefield director of Sudan Surveys. The British envisaged a precise boundary with Italian East Africa running from Gambila south along the base of the escarpment to the northern frontier of the grazing grounds of the Kenya Turkana. The Sudan would cede 1,167 square miles of Ilemi to Kenya and an additional 90 square miles above the old Red Line. Everyone was delighted, and even the Egyptians, who were pleased at the prospect of obtaining the Nile waters from the Baro Salient, agreed.

In Rome the Italians contemptuously rejected the Anglo-Egyptian proposal. In southwest Ethiopia the Italian army and nationalist resistance had decimated the herds of the Dessanetch and Nyangatom who sought to recover their losses from the Turkana in Ilemi. In July 1939 the Turkana began to move south preceded by the protective patrols of the KAR. The Dessanetch and Nyangatom fell upon the unarmed Turkana and their large herds pursuing them all the way to Mts. Labur and Mogilla before the KAR could respond. Several hundred Turkana were slaughtered and any hope of boundary rectification of the Baro Salient for the Ilemi Triangle was soon overwhelmed by a much greater conflagration in Europe.

Unlike other regions of Africa Ilemi and its nomadic inhabitants were directly involved in the fighting of the Second World War with effects that lingered long after the peace. In 1941 the King's African Rifles were mobilized at Lokitaung and marched through Ilemi to defeat the Italian

forces in southwest Ethiopia. After the collapse of the Italians the British withdrew from Ethiopia and the Triangle leaving behind the Dassanetch and Nyangatom, who had been armed to support the Italians, and over 500 armed Turkana *Askaris* of the KAR. Without the presence of the Kenya police old rivalries were revived made more vicious by the plethora of weapons and the presence of new wells drilled to supply British troops. The contentious issue of the Ethiopian boundary was now further complicated by a resurgent Ethiopia and rising nationalism in Egypt opposed to any boundary rectification. After the Dassanetch inflicted heavy casualties and loss of much livestock on the Turkana in August 1944, the Foreign Office drew yet another line, this one Blue, that enlarged the Triangle but did not halt Ethiopian imperial ambitions supporting Dassanetch aggression in Ilemi. Unrelenting pressure from the governor of Kenya and the Foreign Office demanded the Sudan grant magistrate powers to Kenya officials and a free hand to the Kenya police. By 1947 Kenya had seven police posts, 200 police, and another 200 armed Turkana tribal police operating in Ilemi.

While Kenya watched the Dassanetch the Sudan were absorbed with the Nyangatom. From 1949 to 1953 there was constant skirmishing with numerous casualties as the Sudanese Equatorial Corps sought to keep the Nyangatom in Ethiopia behind “the Sudan Patrol Line” in anticipation of boundary rectification. When the Sudanese National Unionist Party won a decisive electoral victory in December 1953, however, any future boundary adjustments would now have to be undertaken by an independent Sudan. A few months later the Nyangatom were permitted to graze in the Lopotokol and Lokorowa valleys of Ilemi.

Six months before the declaration of an independent Sudan on 1 January 1956 the Equatorial Corps, who had been policing the Nyangatom and Taposa, mutined at Torit beginning a southern Sudanese insurgency and civil war that continues to this day. Since independence the Sudan

government has not administered much of the southern Sudan and most certainly not the Ilemi Triangle, and any resolution to the “Problem of Ilemi” will have to await a peaceful settlement to this tragic conflict. This hiatus, however, has not prevented the independent government of Kenya pretending that a half century of policing the Triangle has conferred upon it sovereign rights that belong to the Sudan. In 1964 officials from Kenya and Ethiopia met to discuss a readjustment of their boundary that resulted in an exchange of frontier posts, particularly the strategic Ethiopian post of Namuruputh to Kenya that restricted the free access of the Dassanetch to Lake Turkana. Three years later President Kenyatta formally sought to enlist British support for his proposal to the Sudan government to substitute their present boundary, the 1914 Line, by the Red Line in Ilemi. Nothing came of this initiative, and Kenya has not officially discussed the “Problem of Ilemi,” content to arbitrarily redraw the map of the Triangle.

Official maps of both the governments of Kenya and Sudan had always delineated the Ilemi Triangle by a dotted line clearly marked “provisional/administrative boundary.” After 1978, however, the 1914 Line disappeared on Kenya maps and the dots of the Red Line became a solid line presumably conferring Kenya ownership. This presumptuous cartographic gerrymandering has not been without results. As the years and decades have passed maps and atlases published by Kenya show the administrative Red Line, not the 1914 Line, as the international boundary, and these have been studiously reproduced by reputable publishers unaware of the “Problem of Ilemi.” There are two conjectures concerning these claims. The first is that President Moi at some time made a silent agreement with the Sudan government. Given the fragile relations between Kenya and the Sudan during the past twenty years this is highly unlikely especially since any such clandestine arrangement could not long remain secret. A more realistic supposition, and one that is widely accepted among the Kenyans and Sudanese in Nairobi, is that the leader of the Sudan

People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), John Garang, was delighted to hand over Ilemi, which he did not own or control, to Kenya in return for logistical, medical, and moral support in the Sudan civil war. To make his cartographic claims all the more realistic President Moi has quietly been arming the Turkana as much to dominate the Triangle as to protect themselves from the automatic weapons Ethiopia has given the Dassanetch.

There can be no question that the "Problem of Ilemi" will remain unresolved until peace comes to the southern Sudan. Until then the Ilemi Triangle remains an administrative convenience for the government of Kenya. No cession of territory has ever taken place. The 1914 Order of Council remains the only legal definition of the international boundary.

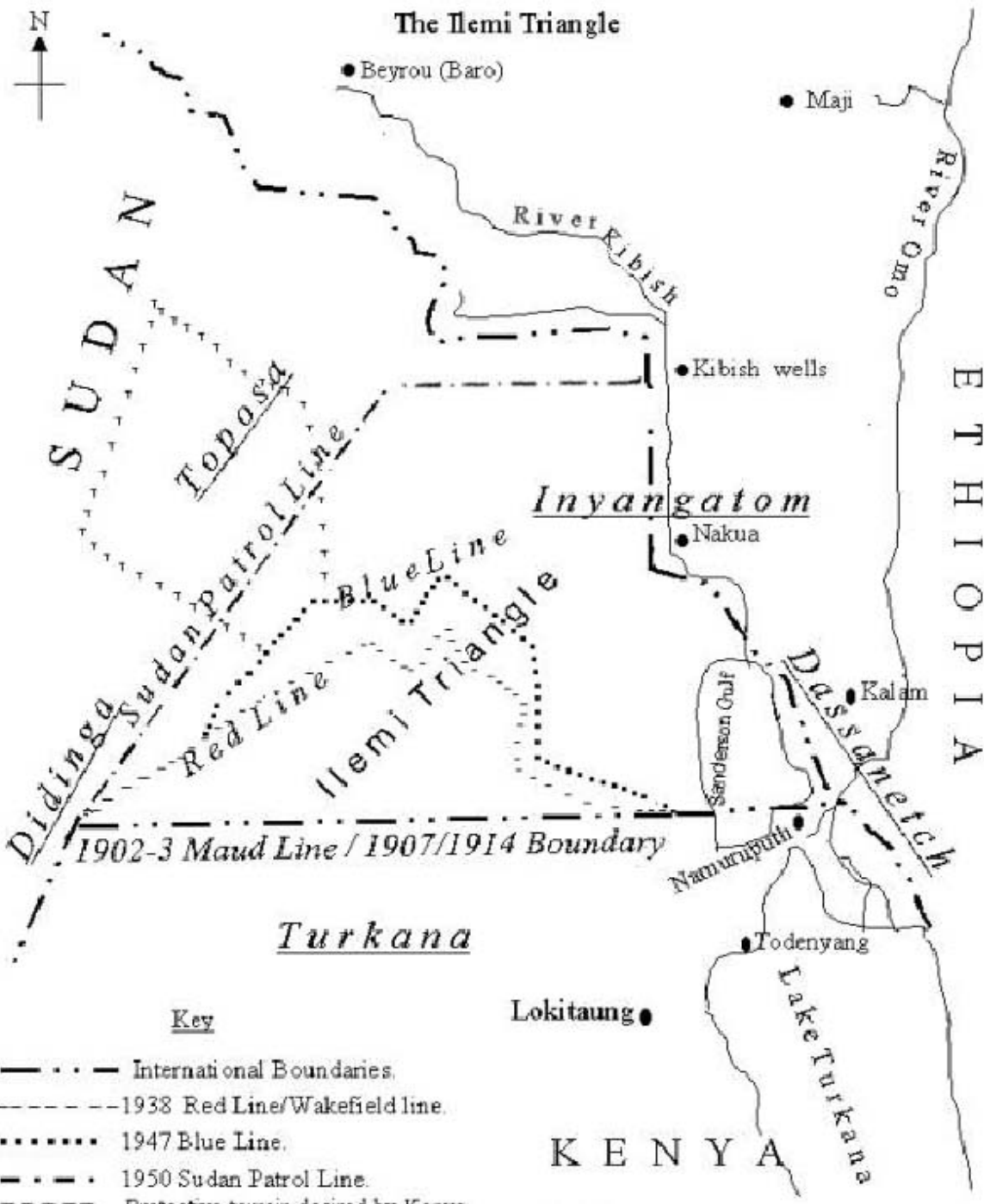


Figure 2. This illustration is not a substitute for survey records.

Source: Nene Mburu. "Demination of the elastic ilemi triangle: Pastoral conflicts and official indifference in the Horn of Africa, *African Studies Quarterly*, *The Online Journal for African Studies*, Spring 2003, 12 www.africa.ufl.edu

END NOTES

- ¹ I am most grateful to Matthew C. Rheinschild for his assistance in sorting out the endless saga of Ilemi.
- ² Hasan al-Turabi in an interview with *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 19 May 1996.
- ³ Central Records Office, Khartoum, Departmental Reports, Survey Department, 16/4, Sudan Agent, Cairo, to Cheetham, Acting Consul-General, Egypt, December 20, 1914.
- ⁴ “General Report by Political Officer Lolimi to Moru Agippi,” by Captain G. R. King, January 15, 1931, National Records Office, Khartoum, Mon. I/2/13.
- ⁵ Governor of Kenya to Colonial Secretary, August 1, 1934 in Turnbull’s memorandum, PRO/FO, 371/41480.

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