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The specious dividends of peace in the Horn of Africa

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From Colonialism to Warring Independences: Manifold Trajectories of Nationalism in the Horn of Africa*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore from a historiographical perspective the complex trajectories of nationalism in the complex and difficult neighbourhood that is the Horn of Africa. I will argue that while recent conflicts have elements of specificity related to regional and international politics, important elements of understanding can be recovered through a broader retrospective look that assesses the ways in which social, economic and cultural interactions have shaped regional politics. A central element underpinning my analysis is a strong conviction that contemporary crises must also be analysed from a regional perspective in order to escape the trap of reading political processes exclusively through the lens of the nation-state. States are crucial actors that cannot be ignored, but they do not live in a vacuum; on the contrary, they are often interdependent.

Keywords: History; Horn of Africa; Nationalism; Colonialism; Conflicts.

Introduction[1]

The Horn of Africa has been one of the African regions with the most prolonged political instability and open conflict since the end of the Second World War and the disappearance of colonial rule.[2] Conflicting nationalisms have ravaged the Horn of Africa, making the region one of the world's largest producers of refugees. With the end of the bipolar system, a new season seemed to have begun with a dramatic reversal of political balances. On the one hand, the Somali state, once heralded as Africa's best

* Portions of this paper have been anticipated in Chelati Dirar, U. (2021).

example of national cohesion, went into a relatively unexpected implosion, while the initial political and social developments following the collapse of the Därg military regime in Ethiopia and the attainment of independence by Eritrea had provided a beacon of hope for dreams of peaceful cooperation and development across the region. However, these hopes were shattered by the tragic outbreak of violence between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998, which took everyone by surprise. This conflict, allegedly fought over boundary issues, ended on 12 December 2000 when the governments of Eritrea and Ethiopia signed the Algiers Agreement (Greppi and Poli 2021), which provided for the establishment of a Boundary Commission based in The Hague, with the Permanent Court of Arbitration acting as registrar and the UN Cartographic Division providing technical assistance. On 13 April 2002, after two years of study and consultation with the parties, the Boundary Commission issued its description of the boundary, which was fully accepted by the parties (Kaikobad 2021).[3]

In accordance with its mandate, the Boundary Commission set to work to ensure the rapid demarcation of the border. However, the demarcation process stalled from the outset when the Ethiopian government challenged parts of the demarcation decision, frustrating the work of the Commission. This unfortunate decision, mainly due to political tensions within the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), then the ruling party within the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition, ushered in sixteen bloodless but devastating years of neither war nor peace that have encrusted the political landscape of the region and stifled the dreams, hopes and plans of people on both sides of the disputed border. It is understandable, therefore, the excitement generated by the decision of the newly appointed Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, in July 2018 to end the stalemate by acknowledging the recommendations of the Boundary Commission and signing a peace agreement with Eritrea in Jeddah, under the auspices of Saudi Arabia. This unexpected development has rekindled illusory hopes for peace and democracy in the region.[4] Flights between the two capitals have resumed, telephone lines have been reconnected and, for a brief moment, border checkpoints have been opened, allowing families to reunite and citizens on both sides of the border to trade.

Sadly, the communities of the region have again been cruelly disappointed, as peace has never really been implemented. In addition, Ethiopia has been engulfed in a growing maelstrom of social unrest, polarised ethnic sentiments, widespread violence and instability, which has only worsened since the signing of the peace agreement with Eritrea. Eventually, the tensions between the new Prime Minister and the former TPLF leadership turned into a full-blown conflict with the massive involvement of Eritrea, which sided with the Ethiopian governments against the TPLF regional state. In this new scenario, even the shaky Somali state has been drawn into an attempt to redraw the main framework of regional politics. As a result, conflict, devastation, community dislocation and widespread instability have once again engulfed the region.

Despite the growing body of literature dealing with these recurrent crises, it seems to me that the protracted stalemate that has locked the two countries for almost two decades and the failure of recent attempts to normalise relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia call for a deeper involvement of historiographical scrutiny.[5] Indeed, historians can help make sense of these seemingly pointless conflicts by placing them in a diachronic perspective. To some extent, this endeavour is facilitated by the fact that the peoples of the region share a profound appreciation of history that is deeply rooted in their culture. In Eritrea and Ethiopia, intellectuals and scholars have been engaged in historiography for centuries, communicating their articulate and often sophisticated understanding of the past. As James De Lorenzi (2015: 5) points out, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed a flourishing of historiographical works by authors rich in their traditions and communicating with a world wider than their own homelands (Reid 2006). Similarly, oral traditions and oral poetry represent a rich and still under-tapped reservoir of knowledge with enormous potential to facilitate the understanding of history and politics in the region (Samatar 2009: 5; Andrzejewski 2011; Reid 2006).
My paper is an attempt to contribute to a more significant involvement of historiography in the understanding of this complex neighbourhood. I will argue that while recent conflicts have elements of specificity related to regional and international politics, important elements of understanding can be recovered through a broader retrospective gaze that assesses the ways in which social, economic and cultural interactions have shaped regional politics. A central element underpinning my analysis is a strong conviction that contemporary crises must also be analysed from a regional perspective in order to escape the trap of reading political processes exclusively through the lens of the nation-state. States are crucial actors that cannot be ignored, but they do not live in a vacuum; on the contrary, they are often interdependent.

The Troubled 19th Century

In the 20th century, the Horn of Africa was marked by complex developments that have affected people's livelihoods and changed the trajectory of political processes. Among these developments, two deserve particular attention: the Ethiopian attempt to build a secondary empire at the expense of neighbouring polities, and the encroachment of Western colonialism. In the second half of the 19th century, a major regional development was the Ethiopian attempt to build a modern and relatively centralised state, which implied an expansionist process towards both the southern and northern marches of the Ethiopian Empire. In this regard, Emperor Yohannəs IV implemented a decisive strategy aimed at diluting the rivalries and antagonisms between the Märäb through a complex policy of economic and social integration that sought to blend differences through marriage and military occupation (Taddia 2004). While the marriage policy sought to circumvent the obstacles that customary law posed to foreign claims to land, the military control of the area, under the leadership of Ras Alula, aimed

to pacify a turbulent territory and strengthen the imperial ambitions of Yohannəs IV against analogous and conflicting ambitions, first from the Egyptians and later from the Italians. It was during these years that the question of Ethiopia's access to the sea emerged as a crucial geopolitical issue that would play a central role in future Eritrean-Ethiopian relations. Access to the sea had been a recurring theme in subsequent Abyssinian polities since the 18th century (Dombrowsky 1985), but it wasn't until the 19th century, under Emperor Yohannəs IV, that the question of direct control of the coastal region emerged as a clear and specific political priority (Gabre-Sellassie 2013). The main reason for this accrued interest is to be found in the need of the Ethiopian ruler to have a secure and continuous control over one of the most important gateways for the supply of arms, without which his expansionist and hegemonic ambitions would have been hopeless. In the south, Emperor Mənilək II pursued a systematic policy of expansionism that lasted from 1865 to 1898. The emperor carried out his territorial expansion, first as King of Shəwa and later as Emperor of Ethiopia. In 1875 he annexed parts of Gurage; in 1881 Kaffa, Jimma, Limmu, Gera and Gumma surrendered. In 1882 it was Arsi's turn. In 1886 Wollaga was conquered. In 1887 Harar, the main commercial centre in the south-east, was attacked and incorporated into Shəwa. Two years later Gurage was completely annexed, followed by the conquest of the states of Kullo and Konta. In 1891 the southern peripheries of Ogaden, Bale and Sidama were conquered and incorporated, and in 1893 Kambatta was added. Finally, in 1895, the kingdom of Wolayta was conquered after fierce resistance (Bekele 2015: 171).

The other major development in the region was the beginning of colonial encroachment, largely triggered by the opening of the Suez Canal to shipping on 17 November 1869, after ten years of hard work, including the use of forced labour. The Suez Canal significantly reduced the distance between Europe and the Indian Ocean, as ships no longer had to sail around southern Africa (Huber 2013: 41-44). The opening of the canal dramatically changed the geopolitics of the Red Sea and brought it to the increased attention of the colonial powers. France gained a foothold in the region by acquiring the trading port of Obock in 1862, which became a French colony in 1888. Italy acquired its first colonial foothold in Assab in 1869, while Britain established its protectorate over Somaliland in 1883 to better protect its interests in Aden, which had been under British control since 1839 (Curli 2022). Within this paper my discussion will focus primarily on Italian colonialism because of its central role in the political processes that shaped the history of the Horn of Africa.

Re-imagined Communities: The Impact of Colonialism

Analysing the complexity and contradictions of State formation in the Horn, Clapham argues that the paradox of the region lies in its being what he defines "non-colonial Africa" (Clapham 2017: 3). This non-colonial status refers to the fact that political trajectories in the region would have originated mainly from non-colonial dynamics.

The point is very original and insightful in that it captures the essence of most of the conflicts that have engulfed the region since the Second World War. However, this does not imply the complete dismissal of the imprint that colonialism has had on the regional political balance. Indeed, colonialism has contributed significantly to the reshaping of power relations in the Horn. Early colonial administrations in the region devised quite successful policies of social and political manipulation focusing on ethnicity, religion, and social stratification (Pollera 1935: 54; Chelati Dirar 2007). Ethnicity was a carefully played card by the Italian colonial administration in Eritrea and Somalia with significant spillovers on Ethiopia. The colonial administration, fully aware of the asymmetrical power relations existing among local communities, resorted to a careful dosage of increased religious freedom, policing of internecine strife, and access to economic opportunities, to earn the support of historically oppressed minorities (Naty 2001: 580; Lussier 1997: 441; Dore 2017: 226-227).

The overall impact of Italian colonialism on indigenous social stratification has yet to be fully assessed, but it is clear that the so-called *politica indigena* (native policy) brought about some structural changes in the long term. Notable among these was the gradual transformation of local authorities into salaried chiefs appointed by the colonial authority and thus heavily dependent on the colonial power for both their material survival and their political legitimacy (Taddia 1998: 23). In terms of cross-border politics, Italian colonial rule played an important role in consolidating administrative and territorial identities within the newly established polity. This complex and protracted process followed two main tracks. On the one hand, within Eritrean territory, the increasing administrative homogenisation of the colonial territory facilitated the mobility of people and goods.[6] This in turn facilitated a process in which regional parochialism and ethnic tensions were partially merged into a skeleton of second-class statehood within which Eritreans, although in a subaltern and highly discriminated position, nevertheless enjoyed a period of relative economic prosperity and stability. A special role in this process of economic growth was played by the military through the massive recruitment of colonial troops (ascari and dubat) from different communities within the colonial territory as well as from neighbouring countries (Volterra 2005). Similarly in Somalia colonial rule on one side opened new economic and social opportunities in the trade sector as well as in the colonial army (Barnes 2007; Mohamed 2000) but, at the same time, sowed seed of future discord. This happened namely with the dismemberment of the Somali community along colonial-born borders (Lewis 1988: 50-55; Mohamed 2002) and also the proliferation of clan-based administrations which further politicised and legitimised clans' role in Somali societies (Ingiriis 2018). In addition, colonial intervention has dramatically altered existing notions of diplomacy and international relations in the region. Far from being an idyllic world, societies in the Horn of Africa were familiar with violence, conflict and oppression, however, as Smith points out in relation to the southern Red Sea region, due to colonial intervention, "a

permissive and cooperative system of diplomacy gave way to a violent and competitive regime" (Smith 2021: 1).
Another element in the complex political history of the region can be traced back to the political developments that followed the Fascist invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. On 1 June 1936, just a few weeks after the conquest of Addis Ababa, a royal decree established the new colonial territories as the so-called *Impero dell'Africa Orientale Italiana* (AOI), which was divided into six major administrative units called "Governo", roughly arranged along ethnic lines (Sillani 1937a: 185) In this new administrative organisation, the former Colonia Eritrea was merged with Təgray and parts of Wällo and Afar territories, while Italian Somaliland was merged with the Ogaden. The reconfiguration of the territory along provisional ethnic lines was explicitly claimed by colonial sources as "a return to its natural geographical and ethnic boundaries" (Sillani 1937a: 185). This new administrative arrangement led to significant changes in the social and political landscape of the region, which are still awaiting better scrutiny by scholars and analysts. For example, Article 31 of Royal Decree 1019 - 1 June 1936 extended to all of Italian East Africa the notion of equality between all religions that had already been implemented in colonial Eritrea. It also established the right of Muslim communities to rebuild their places of worship and to invoke Islamic and customary law in disputes involving Muslims (Sillani 1937b: 175). Equally important were the provisions of Article 32 of the same royal decree, which dealt with language policy. The decree maintained the compulsory use of local languages in public and official documents and promoted the use of local languages in the education of colonial subjects. The use of a triadic language system based on Amharic, Arabic and Tigrinya was introduced for official documents of the public administration in Italian East Africa. Even more intriguing, however, were the provisions relating to education, in which, in addition to Amharic, Arabic and Tigrinya, a number of languages such as Oromiffa, Harari, Caffiña and Somali were to be introduced as languages of instruction in the Governi of Italian East Africa, where they were spoken.[7]
Another major impact of colonial rule can be found in the area of migrant labour. Indeed, the transformative processes unleashed by Italian colonial rule in the region led to a significant mutation of the labour market. In an ecologically and economically impoverished regional landscape, the colonial economy began to attract labour from neighbouring territories. A major recipient of local male labour was the military, with massive recruitment of colonial troops from different communities within the colonial territory as well as from neighbouring countries (Volterra 2005: 48-53). This trend experienced a significant upsurge from 1912 as a result of the Italian invasion of Libya, which saw the massive recruitment of Eritrean men into the military (ascari). The large gaps in the agricultural and construction sectors were partly filled by migrant workers, mainly from other surrounding countries (Negash 1987: 50). This trend accelerated with the military preparations for the aggression against Ethiopia in

October 1935, which led to a dramatic increase in the European population and also opened up further opportunities for local labour. Migrant labour was also crucial in the expansion of colonial urban spaces, where it contributed to the growth of a new urban culture characterised by cosmopolitanism, which increased interdependence between communities in the region (Barnes 2007; Chelati Dirar 2004; Gabre-Sellassie 2015).

Experimenting with Nationalism and Democracy: The Vibrant 1940s and 1950s

The decade that followed the collapse of the *Africa Orientale Italiana* in the summer of 1941 ushered in an exciting period of change, challenge and debate among local elites. The failure of the four victorious powers of the Second World War to reach an agreement on the fate of the Italian colonies plunged the region into a decade of turbulent excitement, and since the London Conference of 11 September - 2 October 1945, the weight of the new system of international relations on the fate of the Horn of Africa had become clear. The rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States dominated the discussions, and the views were too divergent to reach an agreed solution: the United States first proposed a collective trusteeship under the UN or a coalition of the victorious powers, then the idea of independence for all the former Italian colonies. The Soviet Union demanded an individual mandate for Tripolitania and rejected the American project as too complex. Britain, on the other hand, rejected the Soviet demands and accepted, albeit partially, those of the United States, hoping to obtain mandates in Cyrenaica and Somalia itself. Only France was inclined to return the colonies to Italy as the administering power. In fact, Paris opposed the trusteeship solution because it did not want the USSR to be involved in these territories. At the same time, however, it opposed the hypothesis of independence, which would certainly have encouraged the rise of nationalist movements in its North African possessions as well. The new Italian government sought to exploit these differences to obtain the return to Italy of what it defined as pre-Fascist colonies "legitimately acquired on the basis of freely negotiated international agreements" (Calchi Novati 2011: 355). Ultimately, the peace treaty signed on 10 February 1947 required Italy to give up all its former colonies, the final settlement of which was to be agreed by the Big Four within one year of the treaty's ratification. The deadline was 15 September 1948. As provided for in Article 23 of the treaty, the failure of the Big Four to meet this deadline referred the matter to the United Nations, which set up an ad hoc commission.

Much earlier and more hastily than other elites in colonial Africa, the sudden acceleration imposed on history by the disappearance of Italian colonial rule forced Eritrean and Somali elites to imagine possible postcolonial arrangements. Under the pressure of rapidly unfolding events, local elites rushed to imagine possible scenarios for political developments in the region. This was a contradictory process, driven by both internal and external factors. Within Eritrea and Somalia, local elites were divided between those who pushed for rapid access to independence and those who opted for

a more gradual path that did not exclude maintaining a relationship with the former colonial power. Another option on the table was unification with the Ethiopian Empire. On the Ethiopian side, in line with the political trends of the previous decades, an approach emerged that saw Ethiopia as the main power broker in the region and called for the incorporation of Eritrea and large swathes of Somali territory into the Ethiopian state. In the case of Ethiopia, nationalist claims were based on a dimension of historical depth that, through an ad hoc rereading of the region's history, saw the 19th century imperial state in historical continuity with the Solomonic Empire. In contrast, Eritrean nationalists had two different ways of imagining the nation. One was to see Eritrea as an integral part of the Ethiopian empire. In this case, Eritrean nationalists included Eritrea in the broader pan-Ethiopian perspective. The other Eritrean nationalist approach was to see Eritrea as an independent state. In this case, the argument of historical depth used in pan-Ethiopian rhetoric was replaced by the supposed central role of colonial modernity. In other words, colonialism was ascribed a central role in separating Eritrean communities from their neighbours and triggering modernisation processes that would irreversibly divide their political destinies. In the Somali case, nationalist narratives took a markedly different turn, opting for an irredentist approach. The dominant idea among Somali nationalists was that the post-colonial Somali state would emerge from the reunification of the different souls of the Somali nation, which had been fragmented by successive colonial incursions (France, Italy and Britain) and regional expansionism (Ethiopia). However, regardless to their trajectories all these nationalist endeavours were also a vibrant and short-lived experimentation with inclusiveness[8] and democracy.[9] Although the debate took place in a heated and often polarised atmosphere, it was largely peaceful and dignified, an experience that will unfortunately be denied to future generations, trapped in a much more violent rhetoric and practice, darkened by the resort to armed confrontation.

The different social and cultural positions of these elites contributed to these different orientations. In the Eritrean case, independence was the goal of those who feared unification with Ethiopia as a threat to their achievements under colonial rule. Indeed, the power structures within colonial society reveal a number of privileged local interlocutors of the colonial authority, ranging from the lower echelons of the civil service to teachers, colonial soldiers (ascari) and their families, small businessmen and agricultural concessionaires. A similar development can be seen among Somalis in urban centres such as Jigjiga, which benefited from both the Italian and early British occupations. In the case of Eritrea, supporters of independence placed great emphasis on the elements of modernisation introduced by Italian colonialism, arguing that infrastructural and technological developments, along with the relative spread of literacy (despite restrictive Italian education policies) and a shared work ethic, could be cited as key evidence to support the theory of Eritrea's sustainability as an independent statehood. This debate was underpinned by the implicit assumption that

Western modernisation was a viable discriminatory tool for assessing and ranking the supposed differences between the Ethiopian and Eritrean polities. Similarly, in Somalia, the establishment of the Italian Empire of East Africa led to the creation of a greater Somali administration that incorporated the Ogaden region from the Ethiopian governorship into Italian Somaliland. With the defeat of the Italians, the Hawd and the main market town of Jigjiga had their own small British Military Administration (BMA), while the Ogaden, which the Italians had carved out of Ethiopia, continued to be administered from Mogadishu under a larger separate BMA (Barnes 2007: 279). Despite the restoration of Emperor Haile Selassie to the throne, between 1941 and 1948 much of the pre-1936 Ethiopian Empire was under direct British control as part of a de facto administration of Greater Somalia. In these complex and ambiguous circumstances, Somali nationalist narratives were squeezed between ambivalent identities. Indeed, a Somali middle class had emerged as more Somalis became urbanised and dependent on wage labour. They were employed as policemen, soldiers, drivers, clerks and servants. Wartime insecurity caused by the commodity boom, rising food prices and a rapidly growing population due to large numbers of demobilised soldiers provided the backdrop against which political mobilisation began. The main outcome of this process was the Somali Youth Club, founded in Mogadishu on 15 May 1943, which initially functioned as an urban mutual support organisation (Barnes 2007: 280), and later became the most vocal supporter of Somali irredentism under the name of Somali Youth League.

However, the political developments in the region and the nuances that the different nationalisms took on were not only the result of dialectical processes within the political dynamics of the region, but also of the pressure exerted by the former Italian colonial power. A first glimpse of this strategy was provided by the Memorandum on the Italian Colonies, circulated by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in January 1948, which advocated the return of its colonies to Italy (Morone 2016). Indeed, when Italy realised that it did not have enough political space to try to secure the return of its colonies, it changed its tactical orientation. As Tekeste Negash has documented with ample evidence in the case of Eritrea (Negash 2004), Italy began to try to influence the ongoing debate on independence, seeing the independence option as the best solution both to protect the interests of its settlers and to revive its geopolitical role in the region. To this end, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, still fully staffed with officials from the previous Fascist government, sought to build its own consensus base among a heterogeneous bloc of former colonial subjects made up of war veterans, former colonial administration employees and Italo-Eritreans, i.e. all those who, according to the Italian authorities, might have some interest in maintaining close ties with the former colonial power. Similarly, in Somalia, the Italian authorities had long planned to build a consensus among the local population that could influence the visit of the Four Power Commission of Inquiry and lead them to support Italy's return to the former colony (Urbano 2016). With Italian support, most of the Somali groups

that did not share the political agenda of the Somali Youth League formed a coalition called the Somalia Conference, which proposed a thirty-year trusteeship under Italian administration (Lewis 2004).

Whatever the complex interplay of actors that shaped nationalist discourse in the region, it was clear that the three nationalisms that emerged from the vibrant political debate that gripped the region in the 1940s were inevitably bound to conflict because of their inherent incompatibility. The earliest evidence of this conflict-laden trend can be found in the aftermath of the UN resolutions on the future of the former Italian colonies in the Horn of Africa. Indeed, on 21 November 1949, following the restoration of the independence of the Ethiopian Empire, the UN proposed in Resolution 289 A(IV) that Italian Somaliland should become an independent sovereign state after ten years of international trusteeship with Italy as the administering authority. This agreement, while granting independence to Somalia, ensured the permanence of Italy in the country by entrusting the role of administering authority to the former colonial power, a unique case in the decolonisation process. In the case of Eritrea, the recommendation was to refer the decision to a Commission composed of representatives of five Member States (Burma, Guatemala, Norway, Pakistan and the Union of South Africa) which, after a long and arduous consultation with the various stakeholders involved, resulted in Resolution 390A(V) recommending the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown. Resolution 390A(V) was the final step in a long and complex diplomatic process that had begun in 1941, in the aftermath of the Italian defeat in Northeast Africa, with the unenviable task of deciding the fate of the former Italian colonies.

Anze Matienzo, the Bolivian diplomat appointed by the UN to draft a constitution for Eritrea, tried to implement the spirit of the recommendations contained in Resolution 390A(V), which advocated a democratic constitution and ample room for self-government. However, Matienzo's activities were met with an obstructionist attitude on the part of Ethiopia, which sought to obtain a constitutional charter that would have emptied the political meaning of the federal arrangement and its democratic provisions. As pointed out by Tekie Fessehatsion, the main points of contention were issues related to revenue, language policy and other aspects related to the degree of political autonomy of Eritrea within the federal arrangement (Fessehatsion 1990). Ethiopia did not refrain from any means to achieve its goal, including the use of personal threats against the UN envoy (Fessehatsion 1990), and succeeded in obtaining significant amendments to the Constitutional Charter, which changed the original framework proposed by Resolution 390A(V) into a new interpretation closer to the Ethiopian point of view and significantly reduced Eritrea's political autonomy within the federal arrangement (Spencer 1984: 246). The collapse of the federal arrangement marked the beginning of an increasingly radicalised Eritrean nationalism, which eventually led to the adoption of armed struggle as the privileged means of pursuing the nationalist goal.

Similarly, in Somalia, the irredentist Greater Somalia project won the support of nationalist forces, namely the Somali Youth League, from a composite constituency that included Somalis from the Ogaden, Harar, Dire Dawa and the Hawd. This support was further strengthened by the prospect of future oil revenues from the Sinclair Oil Company's presence in the Ogaden (Barnes 2007: 286). This first wave of nationalist gatherings adopted a strong anti-British stance, which also triggered episodes of conflict with the forces of the British Military Administration, as well as violent attacks against the Italian settlers, leading to the Mogadishu massacre in 1948 (Urbano and Varsori 2019). The Four Powers eventually opted for a UN-mandated Italian trusteeship with a ten-year mandate to prepare the country for independence. The British Somaliland protectorate was then re-established and, despite strong Somali opposition, the Haud and Ogaden regions were returned to Ethiopian authority. After an initially peaceful transition, the internal contradictions of regional nationalisms were again dramatically demonstrated in the first decade of Somalia's independence, when the Somali government fomented political unrest in the Ogaden region and eventually sponsored the first inter-state armed conflict between independent African states in 1964, which ended with the Somali army badly bruised (Tareke 2000). A second and more sustained attempt was the military operation launched by the Somali army in July 1977, which ended in another Somali defeat in March 1978. This second military operation was made possible by the massive amount of arms supplied to the Somali government by the Soviet Union as part of the military cooperation between sister socialist nations.

Radical Nationalisms and Protracted Warfare: Armed Struggles

In the second half of the 1960s, the earlier focus of nationalism on territorial claims was increasingly challenged by more sophisticated and structurally engaged demands for social justice and the dismantling of previous social orders. While earlier nationalist movements had been influenced by the military experience of the Algerian Front de Liberation Nationale and the ideological framework of Arab nationalism developed by Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt and the Ba'athist governments in the Middle East (Markakis 1987: 111; Fouad 2002: 201; Iyob 1995: 109-110), by the end of the 1960s they were increasingly in the grip of radical narratives deeply imbued with socialism and Marxism. The radicalisation of nationalisms became even more evident in the ideological and operational frameworks of those organisations which, starting with the Eritrean case, opted for the adoption of armed struggle as the most appropriate strategy to achieve their goals. In the 1970s, the mushrooming of radical organisations such as the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which emerged in 1975 as a radical offshoot of the ELF, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Tigray Liberation Front (TLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was a clear indication of the general transformation that the political landscape of the region was undergoing in those years. Indeed, all these movements, they owed much to an

ideological mix derived from Marxism, Maoism and Amilcar Cabral's doctrine of the liberation struggle (Pool 2001: 59-60; Johnson & Johnson 1981: 181-195).

However, the fascination with radicalism was not confined to guerrilla movements. Indeed, within a few years, radical military regimes took power in Sudan and Somalia in 1969 and in Ethiopia in 1974. As Markakis points out, these were not conventional military interventions aimed at strengthening weak post-colonial regimes, but more ambitious moves that, in addition to removing existing political elites, boldly espoused the socialist cause (Markakis 2013: 14). Initially, the new regimes managed to win the support of left-wing political movements, which played a crucial role in providing ideological and political guidance as well as international recognition. Somalia was the first state in the Horn of Africa to embrace socialism, and its socialist experiment remains one of the most remarkable in the region. Somalia embraced socialism in October 1970 when General Siad Barre, who had taken power a year earlier, announced that Somalia had embraced scientific socialism and had become a socialist state. Ethiopia followed a similar path in 1975, albeit with a more complex and painful involvement of civil society (Tareke 2009).

The idea of the nation that emerged with the turn to Marxism was a blurred and at times ambiguous blueprint of conventional Marxist-Leninist models. Radical organisations in the region presented the nation as egalitarian, revolutionary and developmental. Egalitarian meant the suppression of social differences and class exploitation. Development entailed notions of progress and social transformation derived from Western notions of modernity, with little regard for indigenous epistemologies. This aspect is intriguing because the notions of progress, freedom and justice seem to borrow from earlier notions of civilisation and progress, which were conceptualised by the colonial administration in terms of a civilising mission. In other words, the old colonial dichotomy between modernity and tradition seems to reappear in the guise of socialism. The notion of nation envisaged by these organisations seems to have been imbued with a patronising progressivism that left little room for "traditional" societies. In the case of Somalia, the obsession with the cohesion of the nation led radical elites to sanction the complexity and richness of clan political culture as an atavistic and outdated expression of tribalism, a miscalculation that was to come back to haunt them with the collapse of the Somali state in 1990. In other cases, such as the EPLF in Eritrea, the new political agenda borrowed from Marxism-Leninism's iconoclastic aversion to the past, while carrying echoes of the Maoist obsession with tradition, perceived as the dead hand of the past trying to maintain its grip on the present.

Within this complex ideological landscape, special attention must be paid to the way in which the notion of territory has been articulated, particularly by the liberation movements of the region. This is crucial because it interferes with the notion of borders that these organisations have pursued once they have become governments. In general, there is broad agreement that borders in Africa have strong meanings from the point of

view of the state, as they are crucial for building and strengthening its own institutions, but at the same time borders have little meaning for ordinary citizens who have to cross these borders for subsistence or social reasons (Larémont 2005: 6). However, this widely shared notion of borders in the African context takes on a particular flavour when applied to the Horn of Africa, where, as Christopher Clapham has pointed out, borders often take on conflicting meanings, with some states asserting their very statehood by strengthening their borders and others systematically renegotiating them or attempting to dismantle existing ones (Clapham 1996). This multifaceted approach to borders owes much to the colonial partition of the Horn, but it has also been significantly shaped by the perceptions and practices of the major political actors in the region. In this respect, the different attitudes of the EPLF and the TPLF, the two organisations that contributed most to the overthrow of the Därg regime in Ethiopia and thus reshaped regional geopolitics, are instructive.

In defining Eritrean territory, the EPLF has consistently claimed colonial boundaries as its main source of legitimacy, thus calling for the implementation of the principle of the inviolability of colonial boundaries in post-colonial Africa as sanctioned by the OAU Charter. The EPLF envisioned a multi-ethnic nation-state bound by its colonial past and united by the shared experience of the protracted nationalist liberation struggle against Ethiopia (Makki 2002), a concept epitomised by the slogan "Unity in Diversity", introduced during the liberation struggle years and given new and stronger currency during the 1998-2000 conflict. The idea of the nation that seems to emerge from this slogan is one in which the state allows space for the expression of cultural diversity, which is tolerated and even encouraged as long as it does not threaten the non-negotiable unity of the state. Based on this understanding, the EPLF and later its post-independence epigone, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), have advocated the monopolistic exercise of political power while vigorously attempting to construct a common sense of national belonging among a motley collection of peoples. However, this top-down process runs the risk of imposing an authoritarian nation-building project which, in the case of minorities, could amount to a mimicry of the "civilising mission" reminiscent of colonial practice (Naty 2002: 581). The EPLF/PFDJ's conception of the national territory, its spatial perception and its practical administration seem to have been marked by a mixture of pragmatism and a strong, if naively overoptimistic, belief that the colonial boundaries provided sufficient arguments for the future delimitation and demarcation of national borders. This explains the scant attention paid by the EPLF and the PFDJ to the effective definition of their future political jurisdiction.

On the Ethiopian side, the theory and practice of the TPLF, although initially strongly influenced by the EPLF (Young 1996: 240-241), developed a rather different approach to issues such as the state and its territorial representation. From a broader perspective, a major source of contradiction for the Tigrean liberation forces was the need to define

the legitimacy of their struggle against the Ethiopian government, which had no way of referring to colonial borders. This led to an initially vacillating conceptualisation of the main goals of the liberation movements, oscillating between secession for national independence and the struggle for the democratisation of the entire Ethiopian state. Interestingly, proponents of the independentist option imagined a future for the would-be Tigrean nation that revived the project of reuniting the Təgrəñña-speaking communities that Eritrean nationalists had envisioned in the 1940s (Tareke 2009: 79) and which had been influenced also by colonial territorial reorganisation in the 1930s.

Another aspect that needs to be taken into account when discussing the political practice of militant organisations in the region is the different articulation of notions of institutions, the state and intra-state relations that developed within the political theory and practice of the two organisations. Based on the experience of the liberation struggle, the EPLF seems to have developed an informal and pragmatic approach to intra-state relations, and the formalisation of institutional relations did not receive much attention as priority was given to the supposedly strong bonds of solidarity developed during the armed struggle. This unconventional attitude continued into the early years of independence when, as Ruth Iyob points out, "the newly formed Eritrean and Ethiopian governments glossed over one of the problems common to diasporic states: the demarcation of their borders and the security of their populations" (Iyob 2000: 663). When it comes to defining and imagining intra-state relations, the TPLF's trajectory has been more nuanced than that of the EPLF. On the one hand, like the EPLF, the TPLF developed a model of popular democracy during the years of struggle, with a relatively high degree of popular participation in decision-making and the management of public administration. However, this model experienced a serious crisis after the defeat of the Därg regime, as the TPLF had to deal at the national level with a much larger and more complex state apparatus than it had previously experienced. Central to the TPLF's case was the presence of a sophisticated and experienced civil service, inherited from the long-established bureaucratic apparatus of the Ethiopian state, with which the TPLF had to negotiate and relinquish some of its otherwise monopolistic use of power. To some extent, the increasing strain in relations between the two movements, as well as the two states, in the years leading up to the outbreak of the 1998-2000 conflict could also be attributed to the tension between the anachronistic survival of a model of intra-state relations based on informal camaraderie and the growing push by the traditional apparatus for a more formalised and less ambiguous pattern of diplomatic relations. Indeed, as Dias points out, if there is a lesson to be learnt from the recent outbreak of instability in the region, it is that border delineation and demarcation at the time of state creation and recognition should not be carelessly overlooked, as happened with the creation of the state of Eritrea in an already conflict-prone region (Dias 2013).

Challenges

In this paper I have argued that, from a historical perspective, social and political developments in the region have often included elements of rivalry, often escalating into antagonism and sometimes war, alongside strong patterns of interdependence. It would be short-sighted to read these elements in a mechanistic way as necessary causes of contemporary crises. Indeed, the analysis of these historical processes has a twofold relevance. On the one hand, it can help us to understand the material and social basis of past tensions over land, trade and power. On the other hand, the historical gaze is crucial for deconstructing nationalist discourses that, through a selective reading of history, have capitalised on layers of rivalries and conflicts stratified in the past to feed one-sided narratives about the alleged causes of current conflicts and tensions simmering in the region. Unfortunately, a better and more factual understanding of the specific causes of recent conflicts requires unfettered access to the official documents of the parties involved, which I am afraid will only be possible for future generations of scholars. Meanwhile, a complex array of challenges looms on the horizon, including the resurgence of politicised ethnicities and religions, dramatic challenges to the functioning of states, the fragmentation of the military into clan- or ethnic-based militias, the growing presence of private military and security companies, and unfulfilled promises of democratisation and economic growth. Scholars and analysts are left with the task of making sense of the recurrent recourse to war and structural instability in a political landscape already ravaged by decades of conflict and displacement. Decision-makers in the region tend to make the decision to go to war with utter nonchalance, apparently underestimating the long-term consequences and implications of their decision, probably because they are not the ones who pay the price of war.

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Notes:

1 - In effort to conciliate the needs of clarity and that of respecting local linguistic specificities, I have spelled Təgrəñña (Tigrinya) and Amarəñña (Amharic) names following the transliteration system adopted by the African Studies Centre of the University of Hamburg.

2 - In this paper I have used the toponym "Horn of Africa" in its reduced sense, which includes Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Djibouti. The adoption of a reduced understanding of the region is mainly motivated by the focus on the impact of Italian colonialism on the region.

3 - EEBC [Eritrea - Ethiopia Boundary Commission], "Decision Regarding Delimitation of the Border between the State of Eritrea and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia", 2002, https://pca-cpa.org/en/cases/99/ (last accessed on 20 April 2023).

4 - Selam Gebrekidan, *Ethiopia and Eritrea Declare an End to Their War*, "The New York Times", 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/09/world/africa/ethiopia-eritrea-war.html (last accessed on 12 March 2023); *C. Krippahl, Peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea will promote democracy,* "Deutsche Welle (DW)", 2018, *https://www.dw.com/en/peace-between-ethiopia-and-eritrea-will-promote-democracy/a-44588436 (last accessed on 12 March 2023); Hamza* Mohamed, *Ethiopia, Eritrea and the hope for lasting peace*, "Al Jazeera", 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2018/06/ethiopia-eritrea-hope-lasting-peace-180629130519714.html (last accessed on 12 March 2023).

5 - To mention just a few of these contributions, without claiming to be exhaustive: Joireman (2004), Daly (2006), Murphy et al. (2013) and De Guttry et al. (2021) have explored various legal implications of the conflict; Fessehatsion (2003) has offered a dispassionate and bitter assessment of the political and human failures behind the conflict; O'Kane (2006) has analysed the conflict from the very original perspective of borderland studies; Bereketeab (2013) has discussed the conflict from the perspective of security and intra-state relations, as well as regional processes of state formation (Bereketeab 2023) and performance (Bereketeab 2020); Negash and Tronvoll (2000) have attempted to shed light on the multiple issues underlying the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia; Clapham (2017) analyses the conflict within the framework of the state and its functioning in the Horn of Africa; Reid (2020) offers a fascinating and highly empathetic mix of historiography and memoir, Woldemariam (2018) has analysed the fragmentation of insurgent movements in the Horn in a comparative perspective, while Tronvoll, K. and Mekonnen, D.R. (2014) have discussed the issue of human rights in Eritrea. Alex De Waal has attempted to develop a framework for understanding politics in the Horn, introducing the notion of the political marketplace, an arena in which buyers and sellers trade loyalty for resources (De Waal A. 2015). An interesting contribution can also be found in Magnólia Dias (2013), which seeks to understand the impact of processes of state formation, disintegration and reconfiguration on the recurrence of conflict in the region. David O'Kane, Sabine Mohamed and Magnus Treiber have recently edited a special issue of *Modern Africa* (2022) focusing on the predicament of Eritrea. Kidane Mengisteab's contribution to the debate has been a truly prolific one, with a range of work from the analysis of the role of traditional institutions (Mengisteab 2005) to the impact of environmental degradation (Mengisteab 2012) and, together with Redie Bereketeab, has also addressed issues of regional integration (Mengisteab, Bereketeab 2012). Nationalism and conflict have also been analysed from the perspective of religion in Venosa (2015) and Østebø (2020). There has also been considerable production in local languages, albeit largely tainted by sectarianism. A welcome exception is Gabre-Sellassie (2015). Even literature has been involved in the discussion of the conflicts in the region, as in Wrong (2015), which, based on deep insight into the subject, has written a gripping legal thriller set in the offices of the legal advisor of the state of Eritrea, who is involved in collecting documents and data to be submitted to the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission.

6 - References to the changes in people's mobility across different provinces of Eritrea can be found in the travel memoirs of Renato Paoli (1908); on this issue see also Naty (2001: 585).

7 - Regio decreto legge 1 giugno 1936, n. 1019, Art. 32, published on Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia n. 136 of 13 June 1936.

8 - Though often overlooked by the historiography this season witnessed a significant and creative involvement of women claiming their space in the nationalist discourse (Jama 1991; Iyob 1995; Aidid 2010).

9 - Insightful in this regard are the analysis of Samatar (2016) on Somalia and Iyob (1995) on Eritrea.

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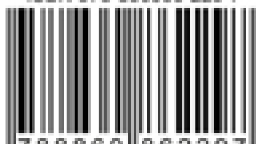

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