

**Rethinking political crises in the Horn of Africa: local approaches to the territorial border in Ethiopia's eastern borderlands**

**Abstract**

Political crises are often more interconnected in the Horn of Africa than in other parts of the continent. The region challenges established notions of statehood and the trajectory of state formation in Africa. This paper argues that the Horn of Africa exhibits dynamic processes of state formation that differ from those found elsewhere on the continent because of the diverse meanings attached to territorial borders in the region. The paper singles out Ethiopia as a case where these meanings can be observed and examined. The paper traces how local actors in Ethiopia's eastern borderlands along the border with Somalia perceive and operationalise the border. The main argument of the paper is that the border underlines the borderland identity of local populations and is also a source of their livelihoods. However, this formulation occasionally challenges the relationship between the borderlands and the Ethiopian state and between the latter and neighbouring countries.

**Introduction and overview**

This paper investigates local approaches to the territorial border<sup>i</sup> in Ethiopia's eastern borderlands.<sup>ii</sup> It does this by examining the ways in which local populations in these borderlands interact with the border and how these interactions are connected to wider political developments in the region. The paper demonstrates that the consequences of this interconnectedness are the occasionally strained relations between the central state and this borderland region which then influence contestations between the Ethiopian state and neighbouring countries. This investigation is important in order to shed light on the emergence of variegated forms of statehood in Africa, especially in the Horn of Africa. Only when we understand the factors that give rise to diverse forms of statehood that we are able to formulate coherent analyses and responses to what often appear to be political crises.

Traditional literature on African statehood is not adequately placed to address the emergence of seemingly deviant forms of statehood that deviate from acceptable notions. This literature is characterised by rigid definitions of what a state is. These conceptualisations have their origins in Weberian Sociology that eschews non-linear processes of state formation. Some of the more prominent literature in this category includes texts that can now be classified as contentious. Jackson and Rosberg (1982) began by posing questions about the continued existence of African states in the midst of what they saw as deviant political formations. The authors concluded that African states exhibited a distorted form of statehood, one that is largely dependent on the juridical features of statehood. When defining state failure Rotberg (2002: 85) argued that "failed states cannot control their borders since they lose control over chunks of territory." This definition of state failure is problematic since most if not all African states have never exercised decisive control over their borders (Herbst, 1989: 676). Thus, this classification appears to suggest that African states are inherently weak and prone to failure.

However, empirical forms of statehood found in various parts of the continent suggest otherwise. Clapham (1998; 1996) recognised and suggested that statehood in sub-Saharan Africa should be viewed as a relative concept. Clapham's suggestions came in the backdrop of increasing classifications of African states in "virtually pathological categories" (Hagmann and Hoehne, 2009: 43). Clapham recognised that political development in many African countries is, to a large extent, context-specific. This is regardless of the comparable conditions in which the majority of contemporary African states emerged in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Analysts have long arrived at what seemed to be a reasonable understanding of the "paradox of African boundaries" (Nugent and Asiwaju, 1996: 1; Herbst, 1989: 673). This paradox refers to the ability of African countries to uphold the territorial consensus reached by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963. Leaders of the newly independent African states agreed to retain the territorial status quo by not altering the boundaries inherited from colonial rule. There is common agreement on some of the reasons why this paradox has persisted. A number of commentators, including Clapham (1996), noted that the nature of the international state system supports the paradox of African statehood, particularly the popular idea of the nation-state (Herbst, 2000: 100-101). Some have gone a step further by demonstrating how the international system supports the 'paradoxical' African territorial arrangement (Englebert, 2009). The overall impression is that African countries have largely remained viable and peaceful with each other, regardless of internal turmoil, because the international system 'rewards' them for remaining intact.

However, the Horn of Africa challenges the 'paradox' of arbitrary but stable African boundaries. It is not that boundaries are not 'arbitrary' in this region, but, the seeming arbitrariness is openly contested, unlike in other parts of the continent. Thus, we must investigate empirical manifestations of statehood in order to formulate informed understandings of the nature of political organisation in Africa. Such an investigation must be historically informed in order to trace the multi-faceted trajectories of state formation found in the various sub-regions of the continent.

The paper begins by setting the context in a brief overview of key political developments in the Horn of Africa since 1991. This year was a watershed moment in the history of the region and clearly distinguished it from other sub-regions in Africa. The paper then highlights the central role of the Ethiopian state in these developments. Using a combination of primary (historical and ethnographic) and secondary sources, the paper will then present the ways in which actors in Ethiopia's eastern borderlands demonstrate understandings of the border that sometimes contradict those of the central state. This section focuses on how borderland populations have imagined and operationalised the border – rendering it a particularly useful tool for their social organisation. The paper ends with concluding remarks.

### **The Horn of contention**

The Horn of Africa has invariably been dealing with one political crisis after the other since the 1960s (Woodward, 2013; Doornbos et.al., 1992). The region stands out as the only African sub-region that has witnessed recurrent inter-state conflict (Cliffe, 1999). Furthermore, since 1991 the region has generated the most decisive empirical evidence of the consequences of contested territorial borders.

The first inter-state confrontation in the region was the 1963-4 conflict between Ethiopia and the newly independent Republic of Somalia. This conflict began the practice of the dramatic performance of sovereignty in the Horn. The conflict set the tone for the nature of inter-state relations in this region in the post-independence period – for the duration of the Cold War and beyond. The next major conflict was between the same countries, but on a much larger scale than the previous confrontation – the “1977-1978 Ogaden War” (Simons, 1996: 75). Between 1998 and 2000 Ethiopia and Eritrea went to war over disagreements on their mutual boundary (Iyob, 2000). During the period 1960-2000 inter-state conflict on the scale seen in the Horn was rarely witnessed elsewhere in Africa. Many have pondered why this is the case but analyses are frequently constrained by available analytical tools. It is crucial to highlight that at the core of all these conflicts lay disputed territorial borders. The saliency of the border is evident in developments that have radically changed the political map of the region since 1991. The end of the Cold War brought significant changes to many parts of Africa, not least in issues pertaining to international relations and regional security (Iyob, 2000: 678; Zartman, 1996: 52). The year 1991 signalled the climax of political crises that brought about unimaginable change in the Horn.

The self-styled Marxist regime that oversaw the Ethiopian Revolution in 1974 was overthrown by a combination of Ethiopian and Eritrean armed groups. Consequently, following the decades-long civil war in Ethiopia, Eritrea became independent in 1993, making it the youngest country in Africa. In the neighbouring Somali territories the Republic of Somalia provided the clearest example of state collapse. With the disintegration of the central state in Somalia, the northern region declared unilateral independence and invoked its colonial boundary as a British Protectorate before its merger with the former Italian Somaliland colony in 1960. However, more territorial changes were on the cards for this region. In 2011 South Sudan became the youngest country in Africa after its successful secession from the Sudan.

Previous understandings of the African territorial consensus have been unable to account for these developments. As an alternative, the Horn has been accorded the status of exception (Young, 1991: 341). Englebort (2005), for instance, has not adequately explained why the seemingly low odds of international recognition for breakaway states do not deter secessionist states from emerging in the Horn. Nor does Englebort (2009) explain why actors in this region appear not to be interested in the “domestic power of command” that he claims is afforded by the legal features of the international system.

The literature is further astounded by the nature of political developments in the ‘crisis ridden’ Somali territories. Somaliland has existed as an internationally unrecognised entity since 1991 and Somalia remains internationally recognised as a state. Somaliland has functioned without international recognition and has achieved relative peace and security and managed to maintain a functioning political entity (Hagmann and Hoehne, 2009: 49; Walls, 2009: 385-389). In Somalia on the other hand, regardless of the absence of a functioning central state apparatus, an array of civil society organisations have intermittently filled the power vacuum (Barnes and Harun, 2007; Little, 2003). Therefore, both what has remained a shell of the former Somali Republic and the emergence of Somaliland raise pertinent questions about the way African statehood is conceptualised.

A number of explanations have been put forward to explain the nature of political developments in the Horn. Some, like Lyons (1999: 86), have highlighted the interconnectedness of the region because of the striking regional implications of conflict.

Cliffe (1999: 90) argued that although the history of boundaries in the Horn shares many similarities with other parts of Africa, boundary related problems in the Horn are intensified by factors specific to the region. He went on to name these factors as:

...the ethnically homogenous Somali state, whose nationalism embraced neighbouring Somali minorities; Ethiopia, with a territory that resulted from resistance to colonialism but also from its becoming an empire; Sudan, straddling the cultural divide between Africa south of the Sahara and the north (Cliffe, 1999: 90).

Cliffe is correct in his assessment of the region. Somali claims on Ethiopian and Kenyan territory in the 1960s played a role in subsequent inter-state conflicts between Ethiopia and the former Somali Republic. However, both Ethiopia and Kenya were able to occupy the legal high ground and to successfully argue that Somali claims violated the 1963 OAU Charter. Indeed, the enmity between Ethiopia and Somalia was heightened because of the identity of the Ethiopian state. The manner in which the Ethiopian empire state acquired much of its territory in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was highly contentious (Donham and James, 2002). The territorial marches of imperial Ethiopia led to the acquisition of territory that was inhabited by ethnic groups whose social, political and economic systems vastly differed from those of Highland Ethiopia. This set in motion the development of a fraught relationship between the Ethiopian state and its vast and diverse borderland regions. However, Cliffe's postulates explain only the *why* and do not adequately explain *how* the border becomes such a salient feature in many of the conflicts seen in the Horn.

The conflicts between Ethiopia and Eritrea and between Ethiopia and Somalia were essentially about state formation. At the heart of the conflicts were divergent understandings of basic aspects of statehood – territoriality and national identity. The Ethiopian state has endeavoured to defend its territorial integrity from the time its territorial limits were determined in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ethiopia's defence of its territorial integrity against various armed movements from within, and from across the borders, was achieved at the expense of its populations in the borderlands and that of its neighbours across the borders. Similarly, the pursuit of a nation-state by the Republic of Somalia was done at the expense of its population and neighbouring countries. Thus, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Ethiopia and Somalia pursued diametrically opposed conceptions of statehood that reflected what Lyob (1995: 29) termed:

...a peculiar contradiction that lay at the heart of the post-colonial consensus: the fragile balance of state sovereignty (territorial integrity) and the right of peoples to self-determination.

It then becomes even more pertinent to examine how this contradiction manifested itself on the ground – in the borderlands, among those directly affected by it. The borderlands offer an alternative to the otherwise conventional narratives of state formation that focus on the central state.

The following section offers a brief overview of how the borderlands under consideration have evolved over time, the section also provides evidence of the manner in which the border has been experienced, interpreted and operationalised by the populations that inhabit Ethiopia's eastern borderland regions.

### **The evolution of the Togochale border and surrounding borderlands**

The region of eastern Ethiopia under consideration covers the borderlands that are adjacent to the boundary that separates Ethiopia from what is today Somaliland. The boundary was established through negotiation between representatives of the Imperial Government of Ethiopia and the British Somaliland Protectorate in 1897 (TNA: PRO: FO 881/ 6943).<sup>iii</sup> The border lies approximately 60 kilometres east of Jijiga the capital of the Somali National Regional State of Ethiopia. The Togochale border can be regarded as a ‘permeable’ boundary – one that is crossed often by large numbers of people and with great frequency, especially by those living in close proximity to the official crossing points (Griffiths, 1996: 73-74).

Clapham (1996: 238) noted that boundaries are socially constructed in the Horn of Africa because of the different meanings they have for the different populations of this region. He argued that the different meanings attached to boundaries are often shaped by the spectacular physical contrasts provided by the topography of the region. Specifically, Clapham noted the dramatic topography of the Ethiopian Highlands in contrast to the lowland desert areas. He noted that for Highland Ethiopians, “good fences make good neighbours” (Clapham, 1996: 240). This is in sharp contrast to the Somali who are known for the famous saying – “wherever the camel goes, that is Somalia” (Ibid). These ideas, as the previous section demonstrated, often find their way into the political arena where they become politicised, creating what often become political crises at the state level, often with wider regional implications.

However, we cannot take these assertions as constant – borderlands are known for their dynamic nature. Indeed, as Baud and van Schendel (1997) proposed, we should look at borderlands in comparative perspective by examining their historical evolution. As much as borders mean different things to different people, borderlands also take on various personas over time. These temporal experiences and interpretations suggest that people in the borderland regions have unique, if not exceptional, experiences of the border. Nugent (1996: 35-36) cautioned against the dichotomisation of the experience of Africans with national territorial boundaries. He argued against the opposing views that suggest Africans have suffered because of the imposed boundaries or that they have merely carried on with their lives as if the boundaries do not exist.

The next section evaluates how the local populations that inhabit these borderlands have conceived the border over time, and what this has meant for the Ethiopian state vis-à-vis its relationship with the neighbouring Somali territory (ies). The section covers the period beginning in the early 1940s following Ethiopian liberation from Italian occupation up to the present.

### *Constructing the border during British Military Administration*

British-led Allied forces liberated Ethiopia from Italian occupation in 1941. The liberating forces established a British Military Administration (BMA) in many parts of Ethiopia, including the eastern borderland region. This administration remained in Ethiopia for just over a decade – up to 1954. The period of BMA in Ethiopia was full of controversy relating to the preponderant power the British wielded in Ethiopian affairs and the threat they presented to Ethiopian sovereignty (Bahru, 1991: 179-183). This period was characterised by overall instability in the Ethiopian Empire (Reid, 2011: 146). However, the most notable changes were in the border regions of the empire, including the Togochale border area,

where the presence of BMA transformed the nature of the border and arguably the borderlands.

During BMA the people who lived in the Togochale border area and surrounding borderlands experienced a situation where the border was stripped of its role as a marker of territorial distinction. BMA in Ethiopia and the government of the British Somaliland Protectorate across the border exercised joint authority in the Togochale border area of Ethiopia. This was largely because of the Haud grazing areas. The latter were northern Somali grazing land that was conceded to Ethiopia at the time of negotiating the limits of the boundary in 1897. The Haud is found on both sides of the border with large portions located in Ethiopian territory. The grazing areas are important when considering that the vast majority of the people who inhabit these borderlands on both sides of the border are pastoralists. The camel is a key source of livelihood for the pastoralists. During BMA, people from both sides of the border crossed the border and roamed freely in the Haud grazing areas. The seasonal cross-border migration became the defining feature of this border.

Many Somali-inhabited areas in the Horn fell under BMA, including the former Italian Somaliland territory to the south-east of Togochale. It was during this period that the majority of the Somali-inhabited areas in the Horn were unified under one administration and authority – even if temporary. The consequences of this were that a number of people from the Protectorate settled in Ethiopia and became cultivators in the fertile areas (TNA: PRO: FO 1015/ 90).<sup>iv</sup> An elder that was interviewed by this author in Jijiga noted that “the eastern part of Ethiopia and Somalia were one country...Jijiga, Hargeisa, Mogadishu as one” (Interview with author, Jijiga, October 2012). The people in these borderlands took advantage of this situation by moving back and forth across what had become an ‘invisible’ boundary. The unrestricted cross-border movement led to a number of people acquiring land on either side of the border – some gained artisan skills, others were involved in cross-border trade and even in cross-border criminal activities. Thus, the identity of people in these borderlands became grounded in their use of the border.

Throughout the period of BMA the borderlands were transformed into an area of social and economic continuity with the neighbouring territories across the border. However, it is not easy to ascertain the extent of permeability at this border prior to the period of BMA. Nevertheless, this paper maintains that starting the investigation at this crucial historical moment provides a sufficient temporal scale from which to assess local experiences of the border. Thus, the paper does not attempt to claim that local meanings of the border emerged during this period, but that they can be observed from this period onwards.

The next section explores local understandings of the border in these borderlands after the withdrawal of BMA – during the imperial and socialist/military periods in Ethiopia. By combining these political phases in Ethiopian political history the paper allows for an unbiased detection of breaks and/ or continuities in the manner in which the borderlanders experienced the border.

### *Consolidating permeability*

BMA was terminated by the 1954 Anglo-Ethiopian Agreement (TNA: PRO: FO 939/19).<sup>v</sup> The post-1954 period in the borderlands was a particularly difficult one for imperial authorities in Ethiopia. They struggled to assert and maintain their authority in the border areas – people continued to move backwards and forth across the border, regardless of state

regulations. Elders that were interviewed by the author in Jijiga revealed that the biggest change in the use of the border was the introduction of passports by Ethiopian authorities.

The Ethiopians were confronted with cases of indeterminate national identity because a number of people from the Protectorate settled on the Ethiopian side during BMA and many owned land in Ethiopia. These people were resident in Ethiopia but they still carried British-issued passports. This means that most of them were considered British-protected people up to 1960 – the eve of Somali independence. One of the elders interviewed for this research grew up in the town of Dire Dawa during period of BMA. He revealed that as a young boy he and his family lived in a British area of the town whereas the market was in the Ethiopian area. He further noted that his father carried a British-issued passport. His father originated from the Protectorate and had crossed the border to settle in Ethiopia – where he remained in the post-BMA period. The elder also noted that as a young man he had several options when deciding on a permanent place of residence – his options being Ethiopia or the Republic of Somalia.

The independence of the British and Italian Somali territories and the formation of the Somali Republic in 1960 transformed the political status of the Togochale border. Because of these changes, some sections of the populations of this borderland region began a hesitant but cooperative engagement with imperial authorities. However, some also rebelled against imperial authority and administration. This period also saw the border experience increased cross-border movement as a result of refugees during the 1963-4 and 1977-8 conflicts between Ethiopia and the Republic of Somalia. As noted by Milner (2009: 19), in the 1960s refugees in sub-Saharan Africa were often a result of “explosive internal social and political situations.” True to form, refugee crises in the Horn often have regional implications and a notable cross-border element.

In the 1980s the borderland populations continued to demonstrate their self-serving identification with the border. At the outbreak of the Somali civil war in the early 1980s between the northern region (former British Protectorate) and the south (former Italian Somaliland), the Togochale border was once again transformed. The main armed movement from northern Somalia – the Somali National Movement (SNM) made eastern Ethiopia its operational base at the invitation of the Ethiopian *Derg* regime (Lewis, 2008: 68). In Harar,<sup>vi</sup> this author gathered the life history of a family with strong family ties in what is today Somaliland. The family revealed that they participated in the Somali civil war on the side of the northern region – from the safety of their home in Ethiopia. This author was told that during the war the family home in Harar resembled a mini-hospital as it became a sanctuary for injured SNM fighters.

Yet, the extent of the appropriation of this border by the borderland populations has become more evident in the post-1991 period. This is when the central state apparatus of the Somali Republic collapsed and the northern breakaway region of Somaliland region emerged. The following section highlights the transformation of Togochale into a hub for cross-border trade and the central role played by borderland populations in this development.

### *Owning the border through cross-border trade*

The seeming crises of statehood that engulfed the Horn of Africa in the early 1990s generated a number of unintended consequences. Togochale border was once again transformed and became increasingly permeable because of rising volumes in cross-border

trade. Somaliland came to offer the nearest and safest coastal outlet through the port of Berbera on the Red Sea coast. Togochale border is now a busy transit area for both official and unofficial cross-border trade, particularly the latter.

As noted by Tegegne and Alemayehu (2002: 2), unofficial trade refers to trade that is not conducted by the government, but is not necessarily illegal, although it can be. This type of trade is also referred to as informal trade, as noted in a United Nations Economic Commission for Africa report (2012). The report stated that this type of cross-border trade occurs when business activities cross borders based on supply and demand imperatives. At Togochale the borderland populations dominate this type of trade with two main products – livestock and *khat*.<sup>vii</sup>

Trade in *khat* is central to the livelihoods of many borderland inhabitants. Supply appears endless on the Ethiopian side of the border – in the Harar plantations where it is cultivated. Demand is also high on the other side of the border. This author witnessed volumes of *khat* traversing the border at Togochale on their way to Hargeisa, the Somaliland capital. The trade involves a number of people starting with those who cultivate it, those who bring it to the border and the intermediaries who buy it and take it across the border. This author observed that the *khat* is then re-sold at exorbitant prices in the streets of Hargeisa because it is an import from Ethiopia. Furthermore, the product needs to be transported relatively quickly since it has a short shelf life. Thus, transportation is an additional commercial activity that involves the borderland populations.

Much like *khat*, livestock trade in the Togochale border area is dominated by the borderland populations. Sheep, cattle, goats and camels are the main types of livestock that are exported across this border. At the heart of this trade are complex Somali networks that regulate the trade. This is not surprising as Little (2003) discovered that the war in Somalia has in fact been quite profitable for cattle traders and merchants in the region. At the Babile<sup>viii</sup> camel and cattle market this author discovered the extent of these trade networks. In conversation with the traders the author was told that the livestock comes from across the Oromia and Somali regions of Ethiopia. Their final destination is the Arabian Peninsula via the Togochale border and the Berbera port in Somaliland. This market is preferred by the traders because of the relative safety and stability of this region compared to traditional trade routes and markets in the Mogadishu area.

The evidence of local approaches to the border cast doubts on the extent of disorder and chaos that is purported to have been caused by the disintegration of the Somali state, Somaliland secession and the failure of the Ethiopian state to control its border regions.

## **Conclusion**

This paper investigated the nature of local understandings of territorial borders in Ethiopia's eastern borderland regions. The paper examined the ways in which local actors have constructed meanings of territorial borders and how these sometimes contribute to the contested nature of the state system in the Horn of Africa. The paper focused on the eastern borderland region of Ethiopia adjacent to the present border with Somaliland – the breakaway northern region of Somalia. The paper presented a critique of the literature on African statehood and demonstrated how it is challenged by evidence from the Horn of Africa. Evidence of empirical statehood from the Togochale border and surrounding borderlands of eastern Ethiopia cast doubts on the dominant narratives of political crises. To explain this contradiction, the paper argued that the approaches of local actors to the



border indicate that it informs their borderland identity and is a source of their livelihoods. The paper aims to contribute to the literature that seeks to uncover empirical evidence of statehood in Africa by departing from outdated approaches that advocate linear trajectories of state formation.

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<sup>i</sup> The term border will be used to refer to the political and physical division that resulted from the demarcation of territory, i.e. the boundary.

<sup>ii</sup> Borderlands refer to the regions on either side of the boundary, many of which are significantly affected by the international border.

<sup>iii</sup> The National Archives, Public Records Office, London, Foreign office documents 881 / 6943 September 1897, *Confidential Papers respecting Mr Rodd's Special Mission to King Menelek*.

<sup>iv</sup> The National Archives, Public Records Office, London, Foreign office documents 1015/90, 1946, *Annual Report on the Administration of the Reserved Areas of Ethiopia*.

<sup>v</sup> The National Archives, Public Records Office, London, Foreign office documents 939/19, 1954, *Withdrawal of British Military Administration from "Reserved Area"- Agreement and Exchange of Notes*.

<sup>vi</sup> Harar is a major town in eastern Ethiopia, further inland from the Togochale border and immediately west of Jijiga.

<sup>vii</sup> This is the mildly stimulating narcotic amphetamine leaf that is chewed in the region, especially by the Somali.

<sup>viii</sup> Babile is a village-town that lies on the main road towards the Togochale border between Harar and Jijiga.