



Colonial borders and hybrid identities

Lessons from the case of Eritrea

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Abstract

Colonialism left numerous borders in its wake that subsequently became contested. These colonial borders have often been discussed as artificial, dividing communities, people or ethnicities that otherwise would belong together. Such an interpretation of colonial borders, I argue in this article, overlooks another important aspect of colonial boundaries: their role in creating nations as 'imagined communities' who in making reference to such borders can lay claim to a distinct national identity. While such an identity can be exclusionary and trigger conflict, it can also have a much more positive and ultimately hybrid function. I use the case of Italian colonialism in the Horn of Africa to demonstrate these multiple roles colonial boundaries can occupy and focus specifically on the creation and contestations of the borders of Eritrea. I argue that the acceptance of borders as markers of identity can be a prerequisite for finding innovative ways to overcome exclusions in the everyday lives of borderland groups. Thus, the example of Eritrea could hold wider lessons for addressing postcolonial disputes about borders and boundaries, if institutional arrangements are put in place that allow fluidity in everyday encounters.

Keywords: colonialism, identity, hybridity, borderland groups, Eritrea

Introduction

Colonialism left numerous borders in its wake that subsequently became contested, either through legal processes or in all out wars, and often combinations of both and/or something in-between (see for example Shelley 2004; Young 1983). On the African continent, even though the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the front-runner of today's African Union (AU), in 1964 accepted Africa's colonial borders as recognized international post-colonial borders, these borders were still often seen as artificial, dividing communities, people or ethnicities that otherwise would belong together. In addition, they were said to at the same time obscure the function sub-national borders could or did have in colonial and post-colonial state-building (Mukisa 1997; Ramutsindela 2010; Wubneh 2015). In spite of this multi-faceted unease about former colonial borders and their translation into the borders of the post-colonial African nation-state, to this day only two new nation states with internationally recognized borders have been created on the African continent, South Sudan (2011) and Eritrea (1993). While in the former it is being disputed that secession can be justified based mainly on colonial partition—a fact that may contribute to its fragmented post-independence politics, for Eritrea justification of independent statehood is deeply linked to its history as an Italian colony and the modernisation of society in its wake (Chelati Dirar 2007; lyob 1997; Jacquin-Berdal 2002; Vidmar 2012; Zambakari 2012; 2015).

In this article I thus take the example of Eritrea to argue that colonial boundaries can play a pivotal role in creating nations as 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991) who in making reference to such borders can lay claim to a distinct national identity. While such an identity can be exclusionary and trigger

conflict, it can also have a much more positive function in terms of creating a viable political entity. The acceptance of such borders in international law can then lay the ground for hybrid practices among borderland groups, but also in relation to neighbouring states.

In addition to relevant literature, methodologically the article is partly based on interview and observation data from Eritrea collected between 1996 and 2019. I have conducted research in Eritrea each year for at least one month between 1996 and 2006 and spent the whole academic year 2000/2001 at the then University of Asmara. I subsequently returned to Eritrea for three to four weeks each time in 2011, 2015, 2016, and 2019. During these stays I conducted elite interviews with the same party or government officials as far as they were still in post; followed and re-interviewed a cohort of former secondary school children and former university students as well as some of their teachers/professors; visited the frontline during the 1998-2000 war and various border areas at different moments in time; and spent time in everyday encounters with various local acquaintances mainly in Asmara, Massawa, Assab, Keren and Senafe. Thus while not being generalizable, my longitudinal work in and on Eritrea and the openness of my informants also when discussing sensitive issues provides me with in-depth knowledge and a unique vantage point from which to interpret the wider literature.

The article proceeds as follows: In the subsequent second section the creation of Eritrea as a territorial nation state is discussed. Section three outlines the challenges of defending that nation state, with a particular focus on the relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the state Eritrea was once part of and seceded from. Section four then considers the recent rapprochement between both states after years of a no-peace-no-war-situation. The conclusion reflects on what clear acceptance of the former colonial boundary might mean for future developments between both countries, their borderland groups, and for the Horn of Africa more generally.

The creation of Eritrea as a territorial nation-state

Christopher Clapham, one of the great scholars of the Horn of Africa, has called Eritrea 'one of the most extraordinary examples of war and state

formation in the modern era', referring in this description mainly to the war for national liberation that Eritrea fought against Ethiopia from 1961-1991, then the longest liberation war on the African continent (Clapham 2001, p.7).

Indeed, much has been written on the controversial interpretations of the quest for Eritrean independence and its legal justification, as well as how it complies with or contradicts the post-colonial agreements that govern borders on the African continent (see for example Lyob 1997; Levine 1974; Sorenson 1993). In many of these debates, allegiances of populations and colonial facts on the ground are being blurred into one another. The resultant histories then either justify the 'Greater Ethiopia' narrative that regards Eritrea as a key part of ancient Ethiopian empires. Alternatively, the case is made that as a distinct Italian colony Eritrea developed in a way fundamentally different from Ethiopia (Jacquin-Berdal 2000). In reality, and in line with many other pre-colonialized parts of Africa, governance in different parts of what is now the State of Eritrea constantly changed, with some parts closely linked to Ethiopia while others experiencing different and shifting forms of governance (for a good overview see Pool 2001).

When considering the justification for Eritrean independent statehood, much attention in the wider literature is given to the close links and subsequent fractures between peoples on both sides of the Mereb river (a key border between present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia), leading to a more general argument being advanced that one of the key issues for the Eritrean struggle for independence was to create a national identity different from Ethiopia (Abbay 1997; Trivelli 1998). This in itself is regarded by many writers as a quasi unnatural process due to the close cultural links and other proximity between both entities (Abbay 2001).

But if one looks at the colonisation of Eritrea in line with more general dynamics of colonialism on the African continent, Eritrea did indeed become a separate territorial entity. Not only that, but Italian colonial rule, brutal in many of its aspects like colonial conquest everywhere, nevertheless resulted in making Eritrea into a much more modern and developed nation than Ethiopia (Longrigg 1960). Whether in parallel some form of national consciousness among Eritreans did emerge or not at the same time is not really relevant for

the claim to then be regarded in line with the wider politics of decolonisation as stipulated by the United Nations (United Nations 1960).

In addition, arguably in most post-colonial nation states on the African continent different degrees of national consciousness were present or evolved over time, accompanied or dominated by other more hybrid allegiances and identities. In the case of Eritrea, it was the Ethiopian victory by emperor Menelik II. at Adwa in March 1896 that led to the acceptance of the Italian possession of Eritrea by Ethiopia. Subsequently, the territorial boundaries between both countries were agreed in various Ethiopian-Italian treaties (concluded in 1900, 1902 and 1906), even if demarcation on the ground was mostly absent, a fact that does, however not impact on the border being legitimate under international law. More generally, as convincingly argued in the literature, Italian colonial rule over Eritrea integrated Eritrea into a different political economy from Ethiopia, even if at the same time colonialism had different repercussions for different local actors and population groups, leading to different political allegiances. This became most evident during the time of the British Administration (1941-1952) that followed British military victory over Italian forces in 1941, an administration that encouraged the formation of political parties and other societal groups to discuss the future of Eritrea—even if subsequently the fate of Eritrea was determined by outside interests rather than its people (it goes beyond the scope of this article to discuss those dynamics in more detail but see Gebremedhin 1989; Markakis 1987; Pool 2001; Wrong 2005).

Taken together, the construction of Eritrea as a colonial state can usefully be described as 'a complex process of political engineering' (Chelati Dirar 2007, p. 262) that resulted in a political entity different from Ethiopia with distinct boundaries (for some different views to this interpretation see Araya 1990; Alemseged 1998). In line with this, Eritrean aspirations for an independent territorial nation-state were, 'emanating from their shared colonial experience' and the quest for independence was one made in relation to territorial and international legal terms, basically claiming to be treated as any other former African colony (Jacquin-Berdal 2002, p. 86).

Indeed, when looking at the war for national liberation and what became its dominant actor, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), legitimacy of that

war is made in relation to the quest to establish as a post-colonial nation state what was first created as a defined territory by Italian colonial rule (for an in-depth discussion of Eritrea's various insurgent movements see Connell 2001; Pool 2001). A core EPLF document, the 1987 Political Report and National Democratic Programme, for example states that 'a nation is a geographical entity with defined and recognized boundaries' (not predominately an imagined or affective community, but the latter arises from the former) into which 'the colonial power introduce[d] new relations of production, gradually dismantling the social structure and create[ing] new social forces' (Eritrean People's Liberation Front 1987, p. 1 and p. 5). In a similar vein, the 1971 EPLF-document *Our struggle and its goals* starts its core text with the statement that 'nobody misses the fact that we, Eritreans, belong to a country with a clearly delimited national boundary, a separate history, separate culture and tradition' (Weldehaimanot and Taylor 2011, p. 569).

In that sense, Eritrea, like other African post-colonial states, justified its claim for independent statehood with colonialism itself (Young 1991). The borders of the Eritrean nation-state were, again in line with other African post-colonial states, created through violent conquest by colonialism and established as borders of an independent nation state through a war of national liberation (for a more general discussion of these dynamics see Dorman 2006). In the case of Eritrea, however, an additional phase of violence was present, the annihilation of its borders at least as international borders through the violence of Ethiopian occupation.

Two things thus make Eritrea partly different from other post-liberation regimes, even if many other features are very familiar to students of post-colonial, post-liberation regimes: Firstly, the fact that between colonial rule and independent statehood there existed a phase of violent annexation by the regional power or the regional hegemon. Secondly, that the re-establishment of the colonial border was the result of a military victory—not, as in many other cases, the result of a negotiated settlement or any other form of international diplomacy.

What makes the Eritrean case particular intriguing is thus the fact that, while other liberation struggles were struggles of emancipation from foreign, Western colonial rule, for Eritrea the struggle was one against the regional hegemon in

the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia, an African colonial power in the analysis of the EPLF (see also Iyob 1997; 2000). In an additional twist, the very existence of a former Western colonial power, Italy, served as the justification for the legitimacy of that struggle. Thus one can say that the Eritrean liberation struggle ultimately, even if not directly stated as an objective, sought to justify the former colonial order on the African continent, as its legitimacy rested on the acceptance of colonial borders as demarcations of contemporary nation states (Müller 2019b).

At the same time, borders and boundaries 'mean different things to different people and in different contexts', thus are fluid and 'infused with social, political and cultural importance' (Tronvoll 1999, p. 1039). But the contours of the internationally recognised or enforceable borders of the Eritrean territorial nation state have a clear meaning beyond such fluidity, and have been a driving force in Eritrean development—for better or worse one could argue, but in essence played a vital role in creating and sustaining the Eritrean nation-state.

During the long years of the liberation war, the quest for this border as a reality recognised under international law was the driving force behind extraordinary achievements by the EPLF in the quasi state it had created in early liberated territories around the town of Nakfa in the northern part of Eritrea, achievements much commented on in the literature (see for example Connell 1997; Papstein 1991; Pateman 1990). These were based on a philosophy of self-reliance, not as a doctrine but out of necessity as few outside actors would support the Eritrean struggle for national liberation as legitimate, but in the Cold War environment sided with Ethiopia as a much more important international player (Habteselassie 1989; Wrong 2005).

The EPLF (renamed People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in 1994) government that came into being *de jure* with independent statehood in 1993 continued to regard self-reliance as a key basic principle—alongside national unity, active public participation, selflessness, social justice and a strong connection between the leadership and the people.

Self-reliance was on the one hand driven by the belief in ownership of the national development of a country Eritreans had fought so long and hard for.

And while most people in government ministries were well aware of their lack of expertise, they were in the initial years keen to learn and in general open-minded and pragmatic. A number of former freedom fighters started to take university degrees by distance learning and Eritrea was open for cooperation and advice—on its terms. Even organisations like the World Bank (WB) found that loans were rather rejected by the Eritrean side unless full national ownership of any development project was agreed. A number of features worked in the EPLF/PFDJ's favour to be able to maintain such ownership: Eritrea had no debt repayment obligations that constrained its room for manoeuvre (as all debt of the past were Ethiopian debts). While partly seen as a difficult partner, it in general won high approval ratings from foreign governments, the donor community and international financial institutions including the WB for its very commitment to self-reliant development. Major parts of the international community thus accepted and even welcomed the government's zeal to set its own terms for engagement with and control of the aid industry (Fengler 2001; Healy 2009). Eritrea became regarded—together with Ethiopia, Uganda and Rwanda—as a model in terms of reconstructing a war-devastated country, symbolizing a new style of governance in post-Cold-War Africa (Ottaway 1999).

Taken together, while an element of control-freakishness was always underlying those dynamics, much seemed possible in the early years of independence in the quest to build a 'democratic, just and prosperous future', as the National Charter for Eritrea proclaims (EPLF 1994).

But when between 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia erupted again, partly triggered by disputes over the concrete border between both states, dynamics radically changed. The Eritrean nation state was once more threatened in a war with the regional hegemon, and an end to the period of no-war-no-peace since then that only ended in June 2018 could only come about once the borders of Eritrea were officially recognised by Ethiopia (Müller 2018a). While the 1998-2000 war between Eritrea and Ethiopia has often been analysed as based on political disputes and economic grievances between both countries and more importantly perhaps between their unaccountable leaders (Abbink 1998; Negash and Tronvoll 2000; Welde Giorgis 2014), I argue it was to an important degree fought to make Ethiopia accept the territorial boundaries of

Eritrea as established under international law once and for all, and with that to preserve what it means to be Eritrean. Once this was seemingly accomplished with belated Ethiopian acceptance of the 2002 international ruling on the border in June 2018, borders on the ground may subsequently become fluid, and other allegiances taken into account in everyday practices and encounters, as I shall argue below (Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission 2002).

During a visit to the frontline of Tsorona in 1999, one of the flashpoints during the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia, a soldier described to me why he was fighting it: 'The land of Eritrea, that is what we are, this earth, these trees ... if you take our land away, we cease to exist, so that is why we are here, that is what I am fighting for, that is what our martyrs died for' (fieldnotes, March 1999). The same soldier later walked with me through a recent battlefield that had seen Ethiopian human wave attacks, where some half-buried bodies of dead Ethiopian soldiers were still to be seen, identifiable by their types of boots. 'This is so sad', he continued, 'these are our brothers and now we fight them here, we are really one people' (fieldnotes, March 1999). For this soldier, there was no contradiction in fighting to secure the borders of the Eritrean land, while at the same time recognising the fallen Ethiopian soldiers not as enemies but brothers, and in doing so recognising the multiple dimensions of fluid identities (see also Tronvoll 2009).

More generally, this dictum, that without having clearly established borders of the state of Eritrea, 'Eritreanness' would cease to exist, has been a major driving force behind Eritrea's domestic policies and in its engagement with the outside world. Eritrean post-independence foreign politics is thus best analysed in light of this quest to secure the territory fought for in manifold bitter struggles in order to achieve undisputed recognition of Eritrea as a territorial nation-state in the boundaries that were created between the Ethiopia of emperor Menelik II. and the Italian colonial power at the end of the 19th century. Such a lens adds an important dimension to not only moving beyond regarding Eritrea as a negative force in the region that entered into violent conflict with all its neighbours (Müller 2019b). It also opens wider perspectives for recognising fluid boundaries in everyday lives, and therefore has the potential to hold wider lessons for boundary disputes in other settings.

Defending the territorial nation state against incursions, no matter where the actual border marker sits

With independence, Eritrea achieved its major objective of establishing a territorial nation-state with clearly defined boundaries. As long as those were not threatened in any way or form as the clear lines on the map, it did not matter that on the ground fluid relationships could continue, and even formal demarcation was not the most urgent matter.

But as early as 1994, when new district maps were created by the Ethiopian Central Statistical Authority, those included as Ethiopian territories areas commonly understood as Eritrean. The Eritrean side raised concerns with the Ethiopian authorities and a first joint commission was set up to address the matter (Trivelli 1998). Subsequently, financed by the German Development Corporation (GTZ) a map of the Ethiopian province of Tigray was being produced that equally included Eritrean territory as part of Tigray in 1997.

Slowly the border that had taken so many years of violence and suffering to create, from Italian conquest to the EPLF victory, became diluted, most visible perhaps in the sharp lines of the Badme-Yirga triangle. Thus, while, as has been stated in many analyses of the 1998-2000 Eritrean-Ethiopian war, a number of closely linked issues were behind its outbreak and vehemence, ranging from economic divergence and trade policies, to political dynamics and a loss of trust (for a comprehensive overview see Jacquin-Berdal & Plaut 2005; Negash & Tronvoll 2000), this was also a border war in its real sense of the word, at least from the Eritrean side: a war waged to confirm the border of the Eritrean nation-state once and for all as a legal entity under international law.

It is in this light that one should understand the Eritrean stance in the aftermath of the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia that had important repercussions, both for internal Eritrean policy dynamics as well as external relations.

Internally, Eritrea once more felt almost betrayed by the International Community (Wrong 2005) and the fact that no pressure was put on Ethiopia to abide by the ruling of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC). Thus, in terms of domestic politics, the self-reliance doctrine discussed above that had made Eritrea arguably an innovative aspirational developmental

regime, was re-enforced as an inward-looking doctrine that tried to prove to the world that Eritrea can go it alone. This resulted in the economic and social sphere as well as in relation to internal politics in a strategy of control and ownership. From 2001 onwards it over time morphed into an almost complete capture of the state by the PFDJ, including the capture of most economic activities (Kibreab 2009). In that, it partly mirrors the Ethiopian experience, where we have seen potentially the 'clearest example of a "developmental state" in Africa' (Clapham 2018, p. 1151), but where the political environment until recently was tightly constrained and the private sector curtailed in important ways (Clapham 2018). In contrast to Ethiopia, however, where the developmental state was based on extraordinary economic growth, partly achieved through aid capture, but more importantly through private sector as well as state foreign investment carefully attracted and selected by state officials, Eritrea at least since 1998 lacked the productive potential to deliver its developmental agenda. Thus, while Ethiopia can be partly analysed as a story of successful 'developmental patrimonialism' (Kensall 2013), the curtailment of private sector economic activities in Eritrea by the PFDJ made the overall situation for its population worse.

The most prominent example of this party-capture and its consequences is probably the construction industry and the resultant shortage of housing (see Müller 2018b), but in most businesses it became impossible to make decisions based on economic logic rather than follow political commands. Over time, the tightly controlled economy became self-serving not only in relation to PFDJ-rationale that was equated with national development objectives, but to benefit party and army officials personally (for details see Kibreab 2009; 2017).

In relation to labour needs and cost, self-reliance was taken to a new level in that the compulsory 18 months of national service, that used to consist of 6 months military training and 12 months developmental reconstruction activities, could and often did become indefinite in duration. To keep people in national-development activities as service recruits was justified with the requirements of the no-war-no-peace situation between Eritrea and Ethiopia. National service recruits commonly work for minimal pocket money in state or rather party-led economic enterprises or the armed forces (Kibreab 2017). Those with the right connections avoid postings to far away locations or service altogether (Müller

2012), but for a large segment of the Eritrean population many years of national service has become the norm. In addition, national service recruits often work in areas that do not correspond to their skills or expertise, thus they are not in fact benefitting the development of the country in the best way possible, as official justification claims. In turn, this has led to an outward movement of Eritreans, with one of the highest per capita percentages of refugees world-wide (Kibreab 2013; Müller 2015). Taken together, the non-guarantee under international law of the Eritrean border has turned what was originally an outward looking doctrine of self-reliance that was grounded in a belief in one's own strength to make one's way in a globalised world into an inward-looking tool of oppression.

In relation to external relations, from the Eritrean point of view, the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities that ended the fighting phase of the war, and the verdict of the EEBC on 13 April 2002 that not only delimited the Eritrean-Ethiopian boundary in exact coordinates but mandates actual demarcation, should have put an end to any uncertainty about the border (Shaw 2007). The non-acceptance on the part of Ethiopia of the EEBC decision that both sides had agreed on accepting as final and binding, and the insistence on the need for further talks, made a refusal of such talks the only feasible course of action when viewed from Eritrea, whatever the price. After all, the EEBC had the clear mandate to delimit the boundary in line with its interpretation of pertinent colonial treaties and applicable international law, and explicitly not make decisions *ex aequo et bono*, thus using the power of arbitration to potentially dispense with the law and include considerations of fairness or equity (Shaw 2007).

This stance of the Eritrean government was, in my experience, widely shared among large sections of the population, including those otherwise critical of government policy. Whenever I raised the issue again with various long-term contacts in Asmara in 2016, that refusing to talk was usually not seen as a rational course of action in diplomacy and engagement with foreign policy, I usually received a sharp reply along the lines: You cannot talk to those who occupy your land and refuse to leave (fieldnotes Asmara, July 2016).

Ethiopia indeed had no justification under international law to refuse to accept

the EEBC ruling, but relied on its importance as a regional partner and ally in the global war on terror as well as on skilful diplomacy to avoid compliance and escape any pressure or censure from the international community (Healy & Plaut 2007; Lyons 2009).

More generally, Eritrea's overall approach to the border dispute with Ethiopia was guided by a similar pattern visible in all Eritrean disputes of its borders, with Sudan, Yemen and Djibouti respectively (for details see Müller 2006). At the time of Eritrea's first low-intensity violent conflict over borders with Sudan, the following statement made by President Issayas Afwerki provides a good guide to understand the general approach to Eritrean engagement with its borders: 'If countries are to coexist peacefully, they should show mutual respect. If, for example, my neighbour destroys my fence and there is nothing I can obtain by taking him to the magistrate, then I will be obliged to destroy his fence' (quoted from Tronvoll 1999, p. 1046).

In particular in a geographical setting like the Horn of Africa, where borders have been established and changed through violence for centuries, such an approach might indeed be regarded as a prerequisite for territorial security—implying the means to respond to violent incursions by, to stay in the picture, the ability to destroy the neighbour's fence. Alternatively, and this in many ways is a path post-independence Eritrea has sought even if not always successfully, borders once created by violence might be secured through international laws and treaties, ideally combined with frameworks that allow regional integration as well as the resolution of conflicts by other means than through violence. The dispute Eritrea engaged in with Yemen in 1995 over territory and geographical boundaries on and around the Hanish islands, another border not clearly defined under international law then, exemplifies this double approach particularly well: Eritrea, in a swift show of military force, quickly gained the upper hand. But it agreed to and subsequently complied with an arbitration process that awarded most of the disputed territory to Yemen, a process hailed as a model for conflict resolution then (Antunes 2001; Johnson 2000; Müller 2006). The arbitration process thus provided Eritrea with a solution to its main grievance behind the dispute, delimitation of its sea-border with Yemen.

The fact that a full inter-state war erupted between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998 can thus be read as a failure of such frameworks of conflict resolution through arbitration, a failure that could have been anticipated as the various contestations over the Eritrean-Ethiopian boundary since colonial times were allowed to fester. In addition, because the Eritrean question can also be interpreted as a case of inter-African colonisation or liberation from a regional African hegemon, this particular boundary and the territorial questions around it were always bound to lead to more violent contestations than other border disputes Eritrea became entangled in (Lyob 2000). For both sides, Ethiopia and Eritrea, the question of territory was infused with a lot of symbolic meaning and historical myth making. For the Ethiopian side, this included referring back to the battle of Adwa and a quest to unite against any threat to Ethiopian territorial integrity, whereas for Eritrea, as outlined above, the claim to *sui generis* statehood was a core foundation of Eritrean nationalism and the claim for an independent state (Dias 2012a).

As soon as Ethiopia's new Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed instigated the process that led to the signature of the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between both countries on 9 June 2018 in Asmara by formally accepting the EEBC verdict and promising compliance, Eritrea in essence had achieved its ultimate war-objective: recognition by the Ethiopian government of its border with Ethiopia in clearly defined coordinates as laid out by the EEBC—even if by far not all sections of Ethiopian nor Eritrean society share this recognition (Gardener 2019; Ylönen 2019).

This then leads to the question what the longer-term outcome of the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia might be, in relation to actual border demarcation and the lives of peoples on both sides of the border, as well as future relations between both countries and Eritrean domestic policies.

The rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia and prospects for the future

When looking at the wider environment of the Horn of Africa, the rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia has already triggered a number of other diplomatic initiatives with the stated objective to usher in a new period

of cooperation in the Horn. While the years of no-war-no-peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia were characterised by proxy wars and destabilisation policies targeting each others internal affairs from within, we have since seen real action to end such interferences and in the case of Ethiopia the return of exiled opposition leaders (Abbink 2003; Maasho 2018; Mosley 2014; Shaban 2018).

At the same time, the various meetings since the peace agreement that have been held between the leaders of Eritrea and Ethiopia as well as across the wider Horn and Red Sea region, leave many issues unanswered, not least in relation to internal Eritrean political dynamics.

When the first border crossings between Ethiopia and Eritrea opened again in September 2018, in addition to emotional scenes of re-connecting between friends and relatives on both sides of the border, trade started to flourish. Within Eritrea there were high hopes of a return to the early developmentalist years up to 1998 that saw economic development and visible material benefits. But not all Eritreans trusted this wave of optimism. And so the few months of more or less unregulated border crossings and *ad hoc* rules—sometimes papers needed to be shown, sometimes the border closed again for a few days but then reopened, and nobody ever knew what was happening when—also resulted in a spike in Eritrean refugee numbers who registered with UNHCR in Ethiopia (Jeffrey 2018). While migration has been discussed as a valve for the Eritrean government to get rid of potentially disruptive youth, this unregulated movement together with non-existent rules for economic activities and unregulated exchange rates of Ethiopian Birr and Eritrean Nakfa, has led to the closure of all border crossings again since April 2019. This closure was to be temporary until a clear framework for cross border trade and movement was in place, but thus far no end is in sight nor any indication from the Eritrean side when the border might re-open again. For now, and amidst rising frustrations from the Ethiopian side who claim they sent detailed documents on future border arrangements to Eritrea quite some time ago and never received a response, a state of peace-but-no-change seems to have replaced the no-war-no-peace stalemate that characterised the situation in Eritrea until June 2018 (see also Müller 2019a) .

But even given this current new stalemate, a crucial condition for envisaging a situation of peace and cooperation that will one day work for peoples on both sides of the Eritrean-Ethiopian border, is the recognition of the Eritrean border with Ethiopia as handed down in the EEBC judgement, and with it as firm as possible a guarantee of Eritrean territorial integrity under international law.

While seasoned commentaries have focused on the impossibility to demarcate the border along the EEBC defined coordinates but advocated flexibility in making border adjustments in order to deal with the justified concerns of residents and communities (Plaut 2018), I argue that would be precisely the wrong approach. In fact, accepting the border as virtually (if not physically) demarcated by the EEBC as uncontested, remains the key prerequisite for sustainable peace in the region. In turn, this acceptance can allow for flexible arrangements on the ground that can accommodate local grievances of borderland groups. It could in theory accommodate the fact that borderland groups on Eritrean territory might in reality be administered by an Ethiopian administration and vice versa, if they so wish.

Indeed, virtual demarcation might make actual demarcation unnecessary, if legal and administrative frameworks for future collaboration are clearly spelled out, thus a reluctance to push for such demarcation by Eritrean President Afewerki should not be seen as an act of betrayal of the Eritrean cause (as many have done, not least in the diaspora who accuse the Eritrean leadership of selling out). In actual fact, innovative cross-border practices have long existed along the Eritrean-Ethiopian border that can provide valuable inputs into such frameworks (see for example Massa 2018).

Even during the time of no-war-no-peace, when the border was highly militarized and on the face of it closed, connections stayed alive, visible for example in numerous clandestine weddings in the town of Adigrat in Ethiopia near the Eritrean border between Eritreans and Ethiopians.

More generally, as documented in a current PhD project from which initial findings are available, people-to-people connections on both sides of the border have been a continuous subaltern process since the end of the fighting phase of the war in 2000 (Ghebreyesus 2018). Not only have approximately 500,000 Eritreans crossed into the North Ethiopian province of Tigray as

refugees since then, and received protection in spite of Tigray in particular being vilified as the core enemy in official Eritrean narratives (Ghebreyesus 2018). In addition, Eritreans continued to attend religious festivals and celebrations in the holy town of Axum in Tigray. And villages in the actual buffer zone cooperated and were at times aided by the opposite administration. Ghebreyesus (2018) here provides detailed evidence of Tigrinya and Saho farmers officially under Eritrean jurisdiction who nevertheless received farming inputs and other support from the administration of Tigray, evidence supported by Tronvoll's (2000) work that presents similar arguments based on research in the buffer zone near the Tsorona frontline.

It is along such lines that one could imagine a combination of the border as stipulated by the EEBC ruling in principle, while showing flexibility and taking into account peoples' feeling of belonging on the ground and their hybrid identities—and in doing so acknowledge that some borderland groups feel distinctly Ethiopian while others distinctly Eritrean, often regardless of their ethnic or other allegiances, or of where the actual border may lie (for a good example of such hybrid identities in relation to the Saho-Irob borderland group see Dias 2012b).

This is not to say that ethnic allegiances do not also matter, while more generally cross border practices among borderland groups vary. They are connected to economic activities and livelihoods, as well as long-term historical manifestations that relate to different conceptions of the importance of territory *per se* and are for example different for borderland groups of settled farmers versus pastoralists (Clapham 1996; Tronvoll 2020). Thus, innovative practices that respect the EEBC border as internationally recognised but transcend it on the ground will look different for different sections of the border and its borderland groups. A good example here is the port of Assab, located in Afar territory, that has the potential to become a major economic hub again for cross border and regional trade. Afar people live on both sides of the border and have had different relationships to the national governments in whose territory they live over time, while a movement for Afar independence also insists. But as proposed in a recent article, now that the border has become demilitarized, one could imagine a future collaborative effort by the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea to develop the region to the benefit of both

countries and the Afar borderland groups, without jeopardizing the recognition of the international border that cuts through Afar lands (Magnet 2019) —even if such a route for now looks like an ‘arduous, uncertain road, a road less travelled’ (Magnet 2019, p. 22).

To make such a road a real future possibility, institutionalisation of the peace process is necessary. Formalised rules on the cross-border movements of people and goods, including immigration, traffic, trade and tariff arrangements, are a prerequisite for closing the gap between what might be called an elite-instigated peace process that has border-recognition as a key objective, and everyday practices of belonging of borderland groups.

Conclusion

This article has analysed the creation and contestation of establishing the borders of the state of Eritrea as a question of unfinished decolonisation. Making reference to the colonial border once created between Italy as the colonial power and the Ethiopian empire sparked a movement of national liberation that initially fulfilled the aspirations of the Eritrean people—even if definitions of Eritrean national identity were always multi-faceted underneath the bigger national narrative (for a good example of the latter see Mahrt 2009). It created a developmentalist regime based on a doctrine of self-reliance that, while initially a force for remarkable nation-building, became a tool of internal oppression in the aftermath of renewed conflict over the Eritrean border with its former occupier Ethiopia. This war brought the overarching objective of securing the territorial boundaries of the Eritrean nation-state as one of the main driving forces behind Eritrean policy, foreign and domestic, into clear focus.

The 2018 rapprochement between both countries that ended a no-war-no-peace stalemate was made possible by the acceptance of the internationally defined border between both countries by Ethiopia and arguably secured the major objective of national independence for Eritrea. This legal recognition, the article has further argued, makes actual demarcation on the ground potentially irrelevant and can open the way for innovative hybrid regimes in the border areas that take into account grassroots objectives and local allegiances. The

emergence of such regimes will, however, depend on the institutionalisation of bilateral relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia more broadly—a process that seems to be help up by Eritrea at the time of writing (see also Tronvoll 2020).

It also needs to be recognised that territorial integrity is only one aspect of sustainable peace in the Horn of Africa, and economic and potentially also political integration that is beneficial to all parties involved is a key factor. While at the moment internal dynamics within Eritrea mean that the peace-dividend that has flown from the recent rapprochement, a key reason behind the decision to award Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed the Nobel Peace Prize, has only partly been realized (Müller 2019a), political change within Eritrea is bound to come eventually. Eritrea as a new African nation state that traces its right of existence to former colonial rule is arguably in many ways a more viable political entity than the ethno-federalist state of Ethiopia (Faleg 2019).

Ultimately and rather ironically, in spite of the fact that Ethiopia largely escaped formal European colonialism, conceptions of boundaries and territorial nation-states that have their origins in Western political thought and practices have fundamentally shaped the relationship between Ethiopia and its small neighbour Eritrea. To accept these boundaries *de jure* can offer a pragmatic way to overcome their dividing character in practice, while at the same time has the potential to create a sense of belonging that can be harnessed for positive nation building endeavours. As such, the example of Eritrea could hold wider lessons for addressing postcolonial disputes about borders and boundaries, if institutional arrangements are being put in place that allow fluidity in everyday encounters.

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