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BOUNDARY AND TERRITORY IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

"African Boundaries and Borderlands"
Edinburgh Centre of African Studies, May 1993

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Introduction

Any reference to the term 'boundaries' in Africa instantly evokes a picture of the lines drawn on maps in metropolitan capitals in the late nineteenth century, which subsequently solidified (with some changes) into the frontiers of today's independent states. The Horn has its share of these, which as elsewhere have come to influence modern politics in profound and often unexpected ways. At the same time, this simple picture scarcely begins to comprehend the multiple and overlapping boundaries which crisscross the continent, or the social entities which these define. In the Horn, the inadequacy of a concept of boundaries that confines itself to the colonial demarcation is particularly evident, since the impact of colonialism on the region was limited to a much greater extent than in most of the rest of the continent by the resilience of indigenous social and political formations. In a sense, the concept of 'boundary' might be reckoned to encompass the whole range of conflicts that affect the region. At the very least, it provides an intriguing and possibly illuminating point of reference through which to approach them.

The theme of this paper is that boundaries in the Horn mean different things to different people and in different contexts; they have been defined much more in terms of indigenous than of external priorities; and the clashing concepts of boundary in the region have helped to contribute to the appalling conflicts which have given it - to note one outcome which can be defined in boundary terms - by far the largest proportion of refugees of any region in the continent. The ultimate outcome of all this has been that, whereas initially it might have seemed that the importance of boundaries was being reduced, through the amalgamation of smaller into larger units, they are now being both multiplied and hardened.

The Social Construction of Boundaries in the Horn

Boundaries mean different things, because different societies are affected by them in different ways. In the Horn, this simple point is made spectacularly obvious by physical contrasts. Along the edge of the great rift, the Ethiopian highlands are demarcated as if by a knife from the lowlands of the Afar, Kereyu Oromo and Somali pastoralists. The ecological gradations towards the Sudanese, Kenya and southern Somali borders are less dramatic, but nonetheless evident. Divisions between different regions of highland Ethiopia are often equally sharply marked: from the highlands of Gojjam and Wollo, you can look at those of Shoa, across deep gorges which (before the days of the road or, still more, the aeroplane) could only be crossed with enormous difficulty, and not at all during the rains.

The concept of boundary is understandably most marked in highland Ethiopia, where it distinguishes not only between ecological zones and political jurisdictions, but also between individual economic holdings. The northern Ethiopian highlands are Africa's only zone of indigenous plough agriculture, a form of subsistence which places an overwhelming importance on the control of land, and hence on the demarcation of land between that controlled by one person or group and that controlled by another. In the days before the revolutionary land reform of 1975, land disputes constituted a high proportion of cases coming before the courts, and were carried on from generation to generation. A proverbial Amhara definition of a good neighbour is one who does not attempt to shift the boundary markers - but good neighbours, equally proverbially, are few and far between. Every Ethiopian house has its protected compound, with a fence which demarcates its own boundary

from its neighbours, and the ubiquitous guard or *zebagna* permanently at its gate. The Amharic word for a boundary, *wasen*, is sufficiently familiar for even someone with a very inadequate familiarity with the language, like myself, to know it.

Along with a powerful concept of boundary goes an equally powerful concept of territory. The Amharic *ager* corresponds almost precisely to the French *pays*: a piece of territory, whether it be one's own small parish or the country as a whole, to which one has a particular attachment. The Ethiopian empire, built on the social hierarchies of ox-plough cultivation, was likewise a territorial state, defined by the area which it controlled, rather than an ethnic unit, defined by the people who belonged to it. In a society where descent, including inheritance rights in land, was reckoned through both paternal and maternal lines, ethnicity was quickly blurred whereas claims on land were multiplied. A similar imperative applied to the imperial government. The business of the state, and in this respect Ethiopia differed not a bit from seventeenth century France or nineteenth century Germany, was to extend the area which it controlled, and to consolidate its control over those areas which it had already incorporated. This was a mission which the late nineteenth century emperor Menilek, aided by imported firearms, pursued with a success unequalled before or since. His eventual successor, Haile-Sellassie, named his eldest son Asfa-Wasen, which means 'expand the frontiers', even though the only expansion that he was able to carry out was the incorporation of Eritrea in 1952. His successors, the revolutionary socialist government of Mengistu Haile-Maryam, placed an intense and ultimately self-destructive emphasis on maintaining the integrity of the national territory and enforcing their control within it. For the military in particular, but also for all of those (by no means all of them ethnic Amharas) who have been associated with central Ethiopian statehood, the maintenance of the territorial boundary constituted a very substantial part of what being 'Ethiopian' was about. The loss of Eritrea, despite the military hopelessness of any attempt to hang onto it, and the overwhelming support for independence unquestionably given by the vast majority of its people, continues to evoke in a large number of central Ethiopians a deep feeling of resentment and incomprehension.

Other groups within the Horn have tended to approach the concept of boundary in rather different ways. The most obvious contrast is with the Somalis, who as a pastoral people share none of the highland attitudes towards demarcating land. Different Somali clans certainly have broadly distinguishable territories, but these are overlapping zones without fixed borders, and the cycle of transhumance takes different peoples over them at different times. The scarcest resource is dry-season water and pasturage, which has to be protected against outside encroachment during the period of the year when it is needed, but which is then abandoned when pasture is available elsewhere. Whereas for highland Ethiopians, good fences make good neighbours, for the Somalis they have been an endless source of trouble. The modern Somali 'problem' derives from the imposition of boundaries on the open range of the Somali scrub, creating problems for pastoralists who, in in the normal course of life, need to move their animals across them. Whereas for most colonised African peoples, 'nationalism' involved a recognition of the common fate of those *within* a colonial frontier, for the Somalis it directly resulted from the resentments of those who had to move *across* such a frontier. The restoration of the Haud and the 'reserved areas' to the Ethiopian government after the post-1941 British administration was immediately responsible for the demand for Somali 'unification'. The Ethiopians, true to their own traditions, pointed out at the founding summit of the OAU in 1963 that the Somalis had never formed a united territorial state, as though that settled the matter. But though a territorial state was, within the conventions of modern diplomacy, what the Somalis were technically seeking, it would be truer to say that what they really sought was not the creation of boundaries but their removal. This in turn was graphically expressed by the popular 'definition' of where the borders of the united Somalia should be set: "Wherever the camel goes, that is Somalia."

These contrasting concepts of boundary each contributed to the anomalous effects of 'decolonisation' in the Horn, where until the independence of the microstate of Djibouti in 1977, no territory followed the pattern that was normal elsewhere, of becoming independent within its colonially established frontiers. In one case, Eritrea, the central Ethiopian concept of territoriality was mobilised in order to secure its incorporation within the imperial state. Aided by its influential diplomatic linkages and a sense of Western guilt arising from the fascist invasion of 1935, and legitimated by a United Nations mission to ascertain (though without a vote) the wishes of the inhabitants, the Eritrean federation essential amounted in central Ethiopian eyes to a rounding out of the country's natural frontiers. In the Somali colonies, conversely, independence involved an attempt to remove boundaries - an objective that was easily achieved with the merger of British Somaliland

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and ex-Italian Somalia, but which created endless difficulties in relations with Ethiopia and Kenya, to which boundaries were an essential element in the definition of the state.

The juxtaposition of central Ethiopian and Somali concepts of boundary and territory obviously provides too schematised a picture of the role of boundaries in the Horn, and variants can be drawn from the experience of other peoples. The Afar of the Red Sea plains, divided between Ethiopia, Eritrea and the French Somali Coast by the colonial partition, most closely approximate to the Somali model, though the lack of any Afar state on which an irredentist claim could be based, coupled with the lack of any major impediment to movement across the frontiers, inhibited the emergence of any movement for political unification. The re-establishment of the Ethio-Eritrean frontier after Eritrean independence, coupled with the movement for ethnic autonomy within Ethiopia and the Afar insurgency against the Issa-Somali dominated government in Djibouti, may raise the question anew.

I am in no position to generalise about the culture of boundaries among the peoples of southern Ethiopia, but it would be plausible to suggest a combination of territorial maintenance against encroachment by neighbouring peoples, coupled with an enhanced awareness of identity and territory as a result of the imposition of central Ethiopian overrule.

Boundaries and Conflict in the Horn

These competing conceptions of boundary and territory have been thrust into the political arena, and substantially modified in the process, as a result of the conflicts of recent years. The attempt to implement the competing national missions of the Ethiopian and Somali states led to the Ethio-Somali dispute, and culminated in the war of 1977-78. Each of these missions, however, equally proved to be impossible to realise even *within* the core national territory, and contributed to conflicts which have resulted in an enforced redefinition not just of boundaries in the Horn, but of the whole idea of what boundaries are about.

The demand for redefinition surfaced first, and has been most definitively settled, in the case of Eritrea, a classic borderland which, analogously to the Netherlands in European history, has been pulled this way and that by the Ethiopian empire to its south, the Sudanic states and peoples to its west, and the Red Sea trade and associated religious and political ties to the east. At the time of the disposal of Eritrea by the United Nations in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the attempt to articulate an Eritrean identity on a territorial basis was largely nullified by the resulting divisions within the indigenous population, and this opened the way for the Ethiopian claim to annexation, which was backed within Eritrea by a Unionist Party which drew its support largely from highland Christian groups and was strongly supported by the Ethiopian government. This provoked some consideration, notably by Moslem groups in western Eritrea, of the possibility of partition; but since the 1950s all of the often conflicting Eritrean political movements, apart from those favouring continued union with Ethiopia, have sought the independence of Eritrea within its Italian colonial boundaries. This, in a sense, reproduces the standard African mechanism whereby the colonial frontiers, however artificial, define the nationhood of the newly independent territory. Eritrea's frontiers, moreover, are every bit as artificial as those of any other colonial formation: the highland areas of Seray, Akale Guzai and Hamasen are indistinguishable in language, religion and traditional economy from Tigray to the south; the Afar of the Red Sea coast are historically pastoralists for whom the boundaries with Ethiopia and Djibouti are as meaningless as those of the Somalis to the south; the Moslem peoples of western Eritrea carry over into Sudan.

In the hands particularly of the EPLF, however, Eritrean nationalism appears to reproduce, within the colonial frontiers of Eritrea, a concept of boundary and territory almost indistinguishable from that of both imperial and revolutionary governments in the years before 1991 in Ethiopia as a whole. Despite the effective articulation of Eritrean nationhood in opposition to first the Haile-Selassie and then the Mengistu regime, the EPLF leadership is predominantly drawn from the same highland and Christian agricultural communities as the central Ethiopian regimes, and shares its attitudes towards the territorial state. Just like the Mengistu regime, the EPLF drew on Marxism-Leninism as an ideology of multiethnic nation-building, even though its opposition to a regime strongly backed by the Soviet Union led it to soften its public commitment to that ideology long before the Mengistu government did so. It shared the Stalinist concept of 'nationality', as a form of cultural identity which had to be acknowledged, but which could not be allowed to derogate from the essential unity of the

state and territory. In particular, the EPLF has never deviated from its insistence on Eritrean territorial integrity.

The issue facing Eritrea, following the overwhelming vote for independence in the referendum of April 1993, is whether a concept of territoriality, backed by an extremely powerful governing movement and reinforced by the level of identity built up during the long war, can sustain the autonomy of a state, most of whose different nationalities have linkages with their fellows across the frontiers. It is paradoxical that at precisely the moment when the viability of the multiethnic postcolonial state is being called into question elsewhere in Africa (and, indeed, the world), a classic example of this kind of state should come into existence in the Horn.

But whereas in Eritrea, the failure of Ethiopian centralised territorial state-building evoked the formation of a new (though smaller) state constructed on similar principles, this option was not open to those who contested the power of the central government in other parts of Ethiopia. Lacking any plausible rationale for secession, of the kind that the Eritreans could derive from Italian colonialism, opponents of the regime were obliged to look for a different kind of state, which in turn evoked a different concept of boundary. This evolution can be seen at its sharpest in the case of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which subsequently associated other groups with itself to form the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and captured Addis Ababa in May 1991 to form the present Ethiopian government. The TPLF is drawn from precisely the same Tigrinya-speaking Christian highland agriculturalists as the predominant element in the EPLF; the two leaders on either side of the border, Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia and Isayas Afewerki in Eritrea, are in ethnic terms indistinguishable and are widely supposed to come from villages only a few miles apart. In cultural terms, the concepts of territory in the two movements might be expected to be identical. In practice, however, the EPLF and TPLF were forced into very different moulds by the legitimation required for their separate struggle against the central Ethiopian government. Eritrea's separate existence as a colonial territory between 1890 and 1952, and its subsequent allocation to Ethiopia by the United Nations General Assembly, gave it a claim to independent statehood (regardless of the much disputed illegality or otherwise of Ethiopia's full absorption of Eritrea in 1962) within clearly defined frontiers. This, together with the sense of territorial identity imparted by Italian colonialism, the political mobilisation over federation and its alternatives in the 1940s and 1950s, and the experience of war from the 1960s onwards, made independence a viable strategy. For Tigray, it was different. Though the region had a strong sense of cultural identity, it had never at any time in more than two thousand years been politically separate from the Ethiopian state. The capital of the ancient Axumite empire, which of course covered much of present-day Eritrea, was in Tigray, and right up until 1889, Tigrayan leaders had taken a much more important role in national government than that of the Shoa region around Addis Ababa. There was no basis, legal or historical, for Tigrayan independence.

The solution adopted by the TPLF was therefore to articulate the Stalinist concept of 'nationality' which was shared by all the Marxist intellectuals who provided the leadership of all of the major political movements of post-revolutionary Ethiopia, including the Derg, its opponents in central government such as EPRP and Meison, and regional movements like the EPLF and the TPLF. But whereas for both the Derg and the EPLF, the idea of nationality was firmly anchored (as it had been for Stalin) in the priorities of a centralised territorial state, for the TPLF it was separated from them. The centralised territorial state was precisely what they were fighting against, and unlike the EPLF, they had no alternative territorial state with which to replace it. Instead, therefore, they were obliged to mobilise ethnicity, and to demand an Ethiopia organised as an ethnic confederation, with a drastically weakened central government. The boundaries of the confederal units would thus be determined by ethnicity, a formula which also enabled the TPLF to incorporate Tigrinya-speaking areas in Gonder and Wollo regions into Tigray, even though they were in no position to make similar claims on the large number of Tigrinya-speakers in Eritrea.

As the TPLF rapidly expanded outside its base areas from 1989 onwards, this provided a convenient formula for alliance-building with other regional opposition movements, even though its Marxist-Leninist organisational structure (and, behind that, the hierarchical attitudes to political authority embedded in the society of northern highland Ethiopia) made it difficult for the TPLF leadership to accept these as equal or autonomous. The first of these allies, the Amhara one, had significantly to be called the *Ethiopian* People's Democratic Movement (EPDM). It was followed by the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO), and after April 1991, by a plethora of organisations claiming to represent a large number of southern nationalities. In the process, the

concepts of boundary and territoriality changed. Whereas Ethiopia had hitherto had subnational units defined in terms of territory, all of which comprised peoples of several different ethnic groups, it was now pushed towards units defined in terms of nationality, the boundaries of which had to be drawn to coincide with the settlement patterns of each particular group. Given that group definition was itself fuzzy in some areas, and that considerable population movement had taken place under the aegis of a single central government from the later nineteenth century onwards, this raised considerable problems.

For no group were the potential problems, but also the opportunities, greater than for the Oromo. Easily the most widely dispersed of Ethiopian nationalities (though only just, if the 1984 census results are to be believed, the most numerous), they have substantial numbers in all of the fifteen regions of pre-1987 Ethiopia except for Gonder and Eritrea. They had nonetheless in the past been prevented from mobilising their potential strength, not only by the domination of a central government with a strong Amhara element, but also by considerable internal differences in religion (Moslem and Christian), socio-economic structure, and relationship to the central political authorities. Christian Oromo settlers in south-eastern Ethiopia were, for instance, virtually indistinguishable from Amharas to the indigenous Moslem Oromo. Partly as a result of these problems, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) which dated its foundation from 1974, had been able to make only a minimal impact in its local insurgencies against the Mengistu regime, in strong contrast to the success achieved by the EPLF and TPLF. The new dispensation offered them the opportunity to achieve a dominant position, through the creation of a bizarrely shaped Oromo territory stretching from Harar in the east to Welega in the west, and from Welo in the north to Borana in the extreme south. This territory would also encompass many of Ethiopia's most important areas of cash crop production, for both domestic consumption and export, and its key lines of communication. Tigray offered no such advantages to the TPLF. Relatively small, with some 10% of the population (against some 30% for both Oromo and Amhara), distant from the major centres of production and lines of communication, ecologically degraded, food dependent, and lacking any source of export revenue, Tigray is probably the region which in all of Ethiopia depends most on external resources. As a result, the control of the Oromo area, contested between the OLF and the TPLF-allied OPDO, has become the critical issue in post-Mengistu Ethiopia.

The idea of a loose confederation of nationalities also had much to offer other peoples within Ethiopia, especially in the southern and western parts of the country. Following the EPRDF capture of Addis Ababa in May 1991, nationality became the basis of representation in the council which was established as the interim and unelected parliament of the new regime; there was also a strong pressure to ensure that central government ministries were distributed between the representatives of different nationalities. A bewildering collection of nationality movements instantly sprang up in order to claim the opportunities which the new structure of government provided. By late 1991 there were over sixty of them, twenty-nine of which had representatives in the council. The only thing which it was not possible to be, apart from a minimal level of representation for a few professional groups, was Ethiopian. This process of fragmentation immediately evoked demands for new territorial divisions corresponding to each of the nationalities, and for nationality citizenships which would determine rights to public allocations within each of the national subdivisions. This process is in many ways analogous to the pressures for state-formation in Nigeria, which leads to a similar redefinition of political claims in terms of ethnic nationalities with rights over a given territorial area. Ethiopia most evidently differs from Nigeria, however, in its earlier (though now submerged) tradition of territorial statehood, in the dispersal of peoples around the country under the protection of a now dismantled central government, and perhaps most importantly of all, in the absence of any source of central government funding equivalent to Nigerian oil revenues, which could be used to maintain the position of a central patronage network. Instead, sources of surplus production in Ethiopia are highly localised, and are likely to be claimed as their own patrimony by the nationalities within whose territory they are located, to the detriment of important areas within the country which are unable even to secure their own subsistence.

It scarcely needs to be pointed out that the attempt to create a Somali state on the basis of a single Somali nationality has likewise foundered. The sources of that failure evidently go beyond issues that can plausibly be brought under the heading of boundaries, and most basically relate to the problems of creating a territorial state on the inadequate foundation of clan-based pastoral societies, greatly exacerbated by the incorporation of the Somali state into regional and global conflicts, the massive supply of external weaponry, and the methods resorted to by the Siyad Barre regime in its desperate

attempt to cling to power. The effect, nonetheless, has been to reinforce the role of boundaries, even in a society to which these have had little meaning, because boundaries provide an internationally acceptable format for managing conflicts.

The initial major source of opposition to the Siyad regime derived from the Isaaq peoples of northern Somalia, and was organised through an insurgent movement, the Somali National Movement (SNM), which despite its name was largely if not exclusively Isaaq in composition. As in Eritrea, the prior existence of a colonial frontier enabled the SNM to make a claim to independent statehood which was not available to other groups further south, since the boundaries of Isaaq territory broadly coincided with those of the former British Somaliland. This coincidence is by no means exact, since Issa and Garabursi clans occupy the extreme west of the former British colony, while the Dolbahante and Warsengeli sections of the Darod clan grouping are found in the east; but the Isaaq are sufficiently preponderant to be sure of dominating a state formed within the British colonial frontiers. The Republic of Somaliland was accordingly proclaimed in May 1991. This lacked both the legal case for Eritrean independence, and the formidable governing apparatus developed by the EPLF, and the declaration of independence has been virtually ignored by the rest of the world. As in the former Yugoslavia and USSR, however, it shows how the existence of a line on a map, designated for very different reasons in a previous epoch, can be turned into the basis for independent statehood.

Conclusion

This survey has been intended to make the point that the idea of a 'boundary' in the Horn has been defined in different ways, both as a result of cultural and ecological differences between peoples, and in order to serve different political demands at different periods. Boundaries have accordingly been removed at some periods, and restored or created at others, in response to the demands of different groups.

Since boundaries characteristically define the jurisdiction of states, and since the impact of states on the welfare of their inhabitants has in this region often been appalling, the existence of boundaries can in a sense be regarded as a resource at the disposal of the state's opponents. At its crudest, refugees escape across frontiers because life is even worse on the other side. The WSLF and the SNM on different sides of the Ethio-Somali border, and the SPLA and EPLF on different sides of the Ethio-Sudanese one, have been able to sustain resistance by moving out of range. Some peoples, equally, have been able to 'play the boundary' by transferring resources from one side to the other. The tangled micro-politics of the southern Ethio-Sudanese frontier has turned especially on the alliances which different groups have been able to make across the frontier, for purposes of arms supply on the one hand or protection on the other. Such alliances have at the same time rendered them extremely vulnerable to macro-political changes over which they have had no control. At a fairly large level, the Mengistu regime's support for the SPLA helped it to control the incursions of the OLF and other opponents, but in turn has disastrous repercussions for the SPLA once their protector lost power in Addis Ababa, and they were summarily expelled across the border in mid-1991. At the smallest level, the Mursi of the Omo valley were massacred as a result of their local opponents' ability to acquire modern weapons through alliance with groups in Sudan.

It could be reckoned that the recent proliferation of boundaries in the region, both internationally with the independence of Eritrea (and more doubtfully Somaliland), and internally with the creation of nationality territories within Ethiopia, represent an opportunity for self-government which may be welcomed by contrast with the experience of the centralised state. From a broader perspective, however, the process of boundary formation marks a failure of political management in the region, the effects of which can only exacerbate problems which are already intense. In particular, by coralling people within their own supposed 'homelands', it is liable not only to lead to the kinds of upheaval, disruption and death which we currently associate with 'ethnic cleansing' in the former Yugoslavia, but also to intensify the difficulties of finding some balance between the badly degraded resource endowments of the region and the needs of all its peoples.

C.S.C., May 1993