

**THE CONDUCT OF AN INTER-STATE WAR
AND MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF TERRITORY:
1998-2000 ERITREA-ETHIOPIA WAR**

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Abstract

Inter-state wars are not one of the most salient features in the post-Cold War era. The literature on contemporary armed conflict, particularly those in the aftermath of the Cold War, tends to overlook the centrality of territory in the causation of war. However, a border incident between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998 led to a crisis which escalated. The war lasted two and a half years, leading to an estimated 100.000 casualties. The article's central claim shows the centrality of territory in its multiple dimensions for the understanding of the war that opposed the two sovereign states.

Keywords: war, territory, borders, identities, nationalism

Resumo

As guerras inter-estatais não são uma das características mais salientes do pós-Guerra Fria. A literatura que analisa os conflitos contemporâneos, em particular aqueles ocorridos no pós-Guerra Fria, tendencialmente não reconhece centralidade ao território enquanto causa de conflito. No entanto, um incidente fronteiriço entre a Eritreia e a Etiópia em 1998 despoletou uma crise que viria a escalar, resultando num conflito de dois anos e meio com cerca de 100.000 vítimas. A tese central do presente artigo sublinha a centralidade do território nas suas múltiplas dimensões para o entendimento da guerra que opôs os dois Estados soberanos.

Palavras-chave: guerra, território, fronteiras, identidades, nacionalismo

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On 6 May 1998 occurred a border incident between the Eritrean small infantry unit and Ethiopian local militia and administrators. This border incident led to the loss of life on the Eritrean side (Connell, 1998). Eritrea's decision on 12 May 1998 to move its regular armoured forces to the disputed border village Badme, and its environs, escalated the crisis leading to the military engagement between Eritrean and Ethiopian regular armed forces. The move by the Eritrean Defence Force (EDF) triggered Ethiopia's formal announcement in Parliament, on 13 May 1998, of its determination to act in defence of its sovereignty if Eritrean forces failed to withdraw from the disputed areas.

This article focuses specifically on how the war unfolded and how it was brought to an end with a particular focus on the territorial dimensions of the war. The article covers the period from May 12, 1998 until the December 12, 2000 Algiers peace agreement.

The first part of the article provides the historical and political background of Eritrea and Ethiopia vis-à-vis the Horn of Africa region. The second section provides a brief overview of Eritrea's war for independence and of the relations between the two insurgent movements which opposed the Derg regime¹ in Ethiopia: the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The article argues that beyond the continuities with the thirty-year civil war in Ethiopia, namely in the relations between the two former insurgent movements, the 1998-2000 war was waged between the armed forces of two sovereign states: Eritrea and Ethiopia.

In addition to territory, the political and military dimensions, as well as the socio-economic dimensions are critical to understanding how the war unfolded. However within the scope of this article, territory will remain the central focus. The section on territory seeks to understand how the divergent interpretations of history on both sides of the border were fuelled by the warfare propaganda. This section will demonstrate that the two-year war became an important source of national mythology for both states. Indeed, this state of affairs bore similarities with previous wars which had opposed Ethiopia to an external enemy (Clapham, 2001, p. 9).

The final section seeks to understand how the positions in the battlefield reflected the ambiguity and the different conceptions and practices of various groups with regard to the border between the two states.

¹ The *Derg* refers to the Marxist military regime established in the aftermath of the 1974 Revolution.

Eritrea's war for independence and the relations between the two insurgent movements

Ethiopia and Eritrea were both part of the Abyssinian Empire, thus sharing a common history, among other traits², until Italy colonized Eritrea (1890-1941). However, as Jacquin-Berdal rightly claims (quoting Halliday and Molyneux) “neither ‘Eritrea’ nor Ethiopia as presently constituted existed in the pre-colonial period” (Halliday & Molyneux as quoted in Jacquin-Berdal, 2002, p. 85). When Ethiopia defeated the invading Italian Army at the historical battle of Adwa (1896) and Italy was forced to shelve its plan to expand further south of the Mereb river (the river between Eritrea and Ethiopia) the two countries followed divergent trajectories.

Between 1935 and 1941, when Italy invaded and occupied Ethiopia, although Addis Ababa was the capital of the Italian East African Empire, Eritrea remained the main commercial and economic centre.

With Italy's defeat during World War II, Britain administered the ex-Italian colony until Eritrea's future was determined.

The period of British Administration (1941-1952) triggered the politicisation of Eritreans around a nationalist project.

Ultimately, the destiny of Eritrea was fixed by the United Nations Resolution 390 A (V) of 1952 which established its status as an autonomous region within the Federation with Ethiopia. However, the progressive deterioration of the federal arrangements and Ethiopia's final abrogation of the Federation sparked dissent and contributed to the emergency of the armed struggle.

The mobilization of support across various groups became the main challenge and aim of the insurgent movements during the war for independence. Ethiopia's forceful reaction to the insurgency and the targeting of civilians both in the lowlands and in the highlands during the war for independence played a decisive role in the acceptance and legitimacy of the insurgency among large sections of the society.

Failure to recognize the correctness of Eritrea's claim to self-determination at the time of African independences resulted in the three-decade war for independence which led to 65,000 military (Pool, 1998, p. 19) and between 150,000-250,000 civilian deaths (Jacquin-Berdal & Mengistu, 2006, p. 97) on Eritrea's side.

² Although Eritrea's coastal regions were subjected to several external influences throughout the centuries, Eritrea's highlands were closely bound to Ethiopia's Tigray. Indeed, the Eritrean Tigrinya are ethnically linked to the Ethiopian Tigrayans. The leaders of the EPLF and the TPLF, who hold currently the positions of Heads of States, President Isaias Afewerki of Eritrea and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, are both Tigrayans. The Eritrean Tigrinya and the Ethiopian Tigrayans speak the same language – Tigrinya –, follow the same religious allegiance – Orthodox Christianity – among other features (Jacquin-Berdal, 2002, pp. 82-83).

The secession of Eritrea and the transition period ran smoothly and were advantageous to the ruling parties.

The nature of the post-insurgent states was conditioned by the different legitimacy enjoyed by the movements which had led the insurgency against the *Derg*. According to Clapham, the EPLF constituted a classical example of a secession insurgency, while the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (which descended from the regional Tigray People's Liberation Front) was a reform insurgency. Although ideologically and militarily these were different movements "in none did the government concede power to the opposition" (Clapman, 1996, p. 242).

The nature of the relations between the insurgent movements during the civil war affected the nature of the relations between the ruling parties in its aftermath. The psychological legacy, according to some observers (Interviews in Addis Ababa, July 2003), was relevant because the relationship was unequal, with the TPLF in the weakest and most dependent position. This situation was diametrically reversed with the TPLF's capture of the Ethiopian state.

According to Péninou one can identify the moment of rupture between the leaderships of the EPLF and the TPLF as 1985. At this time, a strategic conflict arose around the issue of Tigray's independence. The rupture lasted until 1988. For the EPLF, it was clear that Eritrea's independence could only be recognized as long as there was a change of regime in Ethiopia. Simultaneously, the EPLF was rightly convinced that neither the UN nor the OAU would recognize its claim to self-determination to the extent that it implied a disintegration of Ethiopia. For this reason, Eritrea's independence could not be linked to Tigray's secession from Ethiopia (Péninou, 2000).

The seeds for disagreement between the leaderships were planted in this period. The purposes of the struggle forced them to cooperate in order to achieve the common aim: the overthrow of the *Derg*. Once the civil war was over and Eritrea achieved sovereignty and the TPLF emerged at the helm of the state the unresolved issues re-surfaced.

The creation of a new state and new borders

Territorial disputes in the Horn of Africa have persisted throughout the post-colonial period. The nature of the process of creation of colonial borders sowed the seeds for future disputes. Four major players were involved in this process: Ethiopia and three external powers – Britain, France and Italy.

Despite the consensual acceptance of *uti possidetis* principle in Africa, as laid down in the OAU border resolution of 1964, ambiguities in the colonial treaties

with regard to the delimitation of borders led to territorial disputes. At the height of independence territorial disputes happened among the new contiguous neighbouring countries: Kenya, Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia. Ethiopia was the only state in the Horn of Africa that had been at the centre of the crafting of colonial boundaries. One of the striking contrasts between the Horn of Africa and West and Southern Africa is with regard to the type of war in which they have engaged. Inter-state territorial disputes in West Africa and Southern Africa have not escalated into inter-state wars (Korns, 2002, p. 369). This is particularly remarkable because it is widely acknowledged that territory was one of the major causes of inter-state wars (Kocs, 1995; Vasquez, 1995). In contrast, the Horn of Africa has been the theatre of two inter-state wars over borders, namely the 1977-1978 war between Somalia and Ethiopia and the 1998-2000 war between Eritrea and Ethiopia (Buzan & Weaver, 2003; Lemke, 2002).

Although Eritrea's independence did not challenge *uti possidetis*, its newly acquired sovereignty led to changes in the length of shared borders between contiguous neighbouring countries.

With Eritrea's secession from Ethiopia the potential for border disputes between the new state and neighbouring states was overlooked, in particular with its southern neighbour. Indeed, any changes in Ethiopia's territory were significant to the contiguous neighbouring countries. As a consequence, its role in the Horn of Africa remained pivotal for regional peace and security.

After independence Eritrea was immediately involved in border and maritime disputes with its neighbours, namely Sudan (1994), Yemen (1995), Djibouti (1996) (Connell, 2005) and, finally, the border dispute with Ethiopia (1998), which escalated into full-scale war.

One must seek to understand why Eritrea's other militarized disputes over territory did not escalate into full-scale war. One key difference between these disputes and the one with Ethiopia was the degree of rivalry between Eritrea and Ethiopia before the outbreak of hostilities. In the three other disputes in which Eritrea was engaged rivalry was less salient when compared to the increasing rivalry with Ethiopia, which was related to economic and political issues, namely terms of trade, access to the ports, and currency regimes.

It is worth noting, however, that the relations between the ruling parties had been much closer during the pre-independence period. Indeed, the alliance between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) was crucial for Eritrea's international recognition as a sovereign state³. In addition, although an interstate war, the 1998-2000 war displayed

³ This contention, however, does not diminish the legitimacy of Eritrea's claim for self-determination.

some characteristics of a civil war, including the fact that civil wars tend to be less prone to de-escalation and more intense.

The comparison of Eritrea's foreign policy towards its neighbouring states confirms the theoretical claim that the interaction between contested territory, contiguity, and rivalry results in an impressive recipe for conflict escalation (Rasler & Thompson, 2006, p. 159).

This combination may in part explain why the dispute with Ethiopia escalated into full-scale war, in clear contrast with the other disputes in which Eritrea was engaged over its borders.

Eritrea's foreign policy can only be understood in the context of the prevalence of a militarist ethos in the realm of domestic politics. Eritrea's leadership, at the helm of the post-insurgent state, persisted on state building activities that contributed to the militarization of state and society. In this sense, Eritrea's foreign policy mirrored domestic politics and both were embedded in the same continuum of state building. It can plausibly be argued that what happened with neighbouring states was not intended to divert attention from internal opposition; Eritrea's foreign policy resembled an extension of the state's relation with its own domestic opposition. Indeed, all opposition to the ruling party's conception of Eritrean statehood, either domestic or international, justified the incumbent regime's forceful intervention. Consequentially, any citizen that opposed the state became an enemy, and any state or movement in neighbouring states that opposed the regime, and its leadership, became an enemy of the state. In a context where foreign policy making is personality driven, any opposition to the regime is perceived as a threat to the state itself (Connell, 2005; Paulos Tesfagiorgis, 2004). The domestic constituencies (both within the territory of the state and in the diaspora) that opposed the regime became enemies of the state. This domestic and foreign policy orientation led to the isolation of the regime by neighbouring states during and in the aftermath of the war with Ethiopia. Eritrea was forced to forge alliances increasingly outside the region. In February 2005 Saudi Arabia signed a 20 million US dollar loan agreement with Eritrea (BBC, 2005). Indeed, despite Saudi Arabia's previous support to Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) factions, which opposed the People's Front for Democracy and Justice / Eritrean People's Liberation Front (PFDJ/EPLF) regime (Clapham, 1995, p. 126), the isolation of the regime in part explains this significant shift of alliance.

The creation of a new state in a volatile and conflict prone region posed specific challenges to contiguous neighbouring states. With regard to Eritrea's creation and its subsequent foreign policy towards the region, the key lesson to retain is the need to pay particular attention to border delimitation and demarcation at

the time of state creation and recognition. This feature acquires particular significance to mitigate and eliminate potential tensions arising out of border disputes. As the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea confirms, once established, borders are only changed at great cost (Jacquin-Berdal, 2002, p. 219).

As Tekeste Negash and Tronvoll state:

In four weeks what had started as a minor border skirmish had escalated into a full-scale bilateral war – the first such war on the continent in decades (2000, p. 1).

Indeed, the intensity of violence, in terms of casualties, far exceeded the 1,000-death threshold in any given year. Indeed, references to the total number of casualties range from 50,000 (Tekeste Negash & Tronvoll, 2000, p. 99; Steves, 2003; World Bank, 2002) to 100,000 (Amanuel Mehreteab, 2002; Steves, 2003; World Bank, 2002). The available evidence sets the combat related deaths at a minimum of 87,000 (Amanuel Mehreteab, 2002, p. 2).

Understanding the multiple dimensions of territory

As the war unfolded, the symbolic and historical dimensions of territory gained saliency. This section seeks to understand how the construction of national identity became entrenched along the battle lines and led to the enhancement of divergent interpretations of history and of founding national myths to mobilize “soldiers” and “public opinion” on both sides of the border. Finally, the section examines the relationship between the borders and national/ local identities.

Historical and symbolic dimensions

The conduct of the war on the military front was accompanied by an increasing saliency of historical grievances that had long remained silenced. On the Ethiopian side, three historical themes re-emerged during the conflict: 1) the comparison between the victory against the Italians in 1896 in the Battle of Adwa and the victory against the Eritreans in February 1999 in Operation Sunset; 2) the definition of the Eritrean enemy dating back to the involvement of Eritrean troops, the *ascaris*, in the Italian occupation of Ethiopia in World War II, and 3) the rehabilitation of the EPRDF/ TPLF as the bearers of a long tradition of Ethiopian unity whenever the sovereignty of the state is threatened by external aggression.

Badme, the spot of the conflict, was soon to achieve the same standing as Adwa. Adwa, as will be further discussed, was the key location of Ethiopian resistance during the 19th century’s scramble for Africa by the major European

powers. As the war unfolded, the importance attached to the areas under dispute increased. According to Triulzi, the deliberate coincidence of the celebrations of the victory at Adwa and the Ethiopian successful re-capture of Badme reflects this intentional definition of the interstate war as the “second Adwa” (Triulzi, 2002, p. 99).

The war propaganda reflected a much broader resentment against Eritrea’s independence. During the Federation years (1952-1962) and especially with the annexation of Eritrea as an Ethiopian Province, any mention of Eritrean collaboration with Italian troops was simply silenced. In clear contrast to the Imperial regime and *Derg*, during the two-year border war it was common to find references in the media to the participation of Eritreans, *ascaris*, in Italy’s successful campaign that led to the five-year occupation of Ethiopia (1936-1941) (*ibid.*, p. 97).

The demands of the war intensified centralizing pressures over issues such as conscription. Meles Zenawi’s legitimacy decreased within the TPLF, but improved within the coalition, the EPRDF, and among other groups in society. Indeed, the ruling party used the war to prove its “nationalist credentials” (Interview in Addis Ababa, July 2003). Despite all internal divisions the motto “Ethiopia first” seemed to re-emerge from the ashes of the previous regime. Indeed, this marks continuity in Ethiopian politics through successive regimes, since Emperor Menelik had managed to guarantee the borders of the sovereign Ethiopian state during the European powers’ “scramble for Africa”.

During the final stage of the war Prime Minister Meles Zenawi played the victory card successfully. The final offensive against Eritrean armed forces was launched during the May 2000 elections. The coincidence of these two major events seems to suggest that this strategy was followed to boost the EPRDF support’s base throughout the country.

On the Eritrean side, one historical theme re-emerged during the conflict: the genealogy of the Project of a Greater Tigray was traced back to the incursions of Emperor Yohannes and his commander *Ras* Alula in the 1870s and 1880s (Reid, 2003, p. 379).

Reid suggests that this historical parallel emerged in the late 1990s. Indeed, during their struggle for self-determination Eritreans rarely substantiated their claims in a deeply-rooted historical identity.

As Jacquin-Berdal pointed out:

Eritreans defined their nationalist aspiration as emanating from their shared colonial experience and presented the question of independence essentially in territorial and international legal terms, arguing that Eritrea’s right to self-determination

should be decided on the same grounds as those of other ex-African colonies (2002, p. 86).

These developments highlight the relevance of the historical dimensions of territory to understanding the centrality of the border question in this particular war. In addition, these considerations point to a more significant development. As the war unfolded, the propaganda warfare led not only to diverging interpretations of history but also to a revival of historical myths. The media and the warring parties daily fuelled these historical myths and, more significantly, the states constructed and sanctioned their revival. The subsequent section will analyse the revival of these myths to illuminate their role as boundary-defining mechanisms, which gained particular salience as the war unfolded.

Historical myths as boundary-defining mechanisms

Ethiopia and Eritrea and especially the Amhara and the Tigrinya-speaking communities north and south of the Mereb (Abyssinia) shared a common history up to the 19th century, i.e., until the Italian colonization of Eritrea (Donham, 1986, p. 19). Their foundation myths were based upon the dynastic, as opposed to the national, principle. With the emergence of nationalism in Eritrea a significant shift occurred. As Sorenson claims:

(...) while contact with Abyssinian kings to the south was acknowledged, Eritrean nationalists claimed that no Abyssinian king ruled the whole territory and that Turkish and Egyptian occupation contributed to the development of a separate regional history (Sorenson, 1993, p. 43).

Eritrea's nationalism had to be pushed against the past "when Eritrea was inextricably linked to the main Abyssinian body" (Reid, 2001, p. 268). Indeed, Eritrea's nationalism is "historically grounded in the liberation war" and posed an intrinsic challenge to the myth of "Greater Ethiopia" (Dorman, 2005, p. 217; Jacquin-Berdal, 2000; 2002). This section does not examine the historical accuracy of the facts; its aim is to analyse how the interpretation of history and its use by the ruling parties during both the civil war and the two-year war, elevated historical myths as boundary defining mechanisms.

The 1998-2000 war was accompanied by diametrically opposed interpretations of the Italian expansion in the Horn of Africa. While for Eritrea the colonial legacy remained the legitimate basis for self-determination and was used to nurture state and national identity formation and consolidation after 1993, for Ethiopia the legacy of the state's successful military victory over Italy's attempt to

colonize Ethiopia in the 19th century remained one of the founding myths of the modern sovereign state.

The incumbent regime in Ethiopia equated the Ethio-Eritrean war with the 19th century armed conflict between Ethiopia and Italy. The incumbent regime in Eritrea equated the Ethio-Eritrean war with the armed conflict between the EPLF and Ethiopia.

During the war, propaganda, either in the media and/or over the Internet, dif-fused the Eritrean and Ethiopian versions of these historical myths and counter-myths. The intensity of the war propaganda simultaneously fuelled and mirrored the bloodshed on the frontlines⁴.

This next section examines how propaganda during the war played on alleged historical grievances.

The myth of being *sui generis*

In the Eritrean case, the myth of being *sui generis* antedated the 1998-2000 war. The myth of being *sui generis* characterized the relations between the two Fronts during the civil war. One of the central sources of tension between the EPLF and the TPLF was the latter's initial ambiguity with regard to the insurgency's aims (Young, 1996, pp. 105-120). When the TPLF voiced its aim of seeking self-determination for Tigray, the EPLF immediately resisted this trend and exerted pressure upon the TPLF leadership to abandon it. From the EPLF standpoint, TPLF's attempted secession would not only fail to gather legitimacy internationally, but would also undermine the Eritrean case by stealing its singularity and specificity (Marchal, 1993, p. 10). In addition, this aim would imperil Eritrea's fight for self-determination, as it raised the suspicion of a plea to revive the idea of a "Greater Tigray", uniting in one territory the two Tigrinya-speaking communities north and south of the Mereb. This concern was anchored on the merger of Eritrea and Tigray, as a Greater Tigray Province, during the Italian re-organization of Ethiopia within the East African Empire, which occurred between 1936 and 1941 (Gilkes, 1975, p. 192).

At the beginning of the hostilities, from the Eritrean standpoint, the escalation of the Badme crisis reflected the "woyane" (i.e. TPLF) project to revive the "Greater Tigray" aim. From the Ethiopian standpoint, Medhane Tadesse responded that

⁴ Hansen (2006). Stig Harle Jansen's thesis contributes to the understanding of the evolution of the public debate and decision-making before and during the war. The thesis reflects upon the opening up of the press and shows how the oppositional press' coverage of the relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea after 1991 and with the outbreak of the hostilities constrained the EPRDF to follow a more nationalistic direction. Federica Guazzini (2004) contributes to the understanding of the public debates on the Internet. Guazzini claims that the debates reflected the different usages of history and of the liberation war in order to make sense of the armed conflict. Simultaneously it re-opened the debate on Eritrea's relations with Tigray (and Ethiopia at a later stage) and on the relations between shabya (EPLF) and woyane (TPLF).

“the TPLF killed the whole project once and for all when it declared in 1975 that the Eritrean question was a colonial question” (Medhane, 1999, p. 86).

The counter-myth to the *sui generis* is the myth of common descent (Kolstø, 2005, p. 19). Indeed, the rhetoric in Addis Ababa and among non-Tigrinya speaking communities⁵ in Ethiopia is quite distinct from that of the Ethiopian Tigrinya-speaking communities with regard to Eritrea. In spite of the war, Tigrinya-speaking communities and Tigrayans, based either in the capital or in Tigray, insisted that: “We and the Eritreans are the same ‘people’ and now we are separated because of the closure of the border” (Several interviews in Tigray, July 2005).

Others, while sharing the perception of the commonalities between the “people”, would insist that the problem was between the leaderships (Interview in Addis Ababa, August 2005).

In the end, it was not the partition of the territory and Eritrea’s independence that separated the Tigrinya-speaking communities in Ethiopia from their counterpart across the border; it was the two-year war and the closure of the border that followed it.

In comparison with other colonial states in Africa, Eritrea’s trajectory was *sui generis* because the areas from which it had been divided had remained formally independent (Halliday & Molineux, 1981, p. 175). As Halliday and Molyneux argue, the fact that Ethiopia had not undergone a corresponding period of colonial rule did not obliterate the preceding territorial claim (*ibid.*, p. 175). The Tigrayan rulers in the 19th century had resented Menelik’s concession to the Italians of part of their territory (Rubenson, 1976). Eritrea’s claim that the 1998-2000 war was a second war for its independence should be understood against this background.

The myth of being *antimurale* and martyrism

In the context of the two-year war one historian promptly captured the reappearance of the past in the antagonistic propaganda warfare. Triulzi was among the first to aptly draw attention to this function of historical myths. By equating the recapture of Badme in February 1999 to a “second Adwa” the Ethiopian government was drawing upon the foundation myth of the Ethiopian modern sovereign state (Triulzi, 2002). Badme sealed the victory of Ethiopia over external aggression (Rubenson, 1976), acquiring a similar standing to Adwa a century earlier. Furthermore, both Adwa and Badme shared the same geographical location within Ethiopia: in Tigray’s region. As a century earlier, the region was

⁵ I used the term Tigrinya-speaking communities rather than Tigrayan ethnic group because in Tigray people who identify with other ethnic groups also speak Tigrinya and tend to share this view.

once again portrayed as the main theatre where Ethiopia stood united against the threat to its territorial integrity.

This strategy successfully contributed to: i) legitimise the government's conduct, ii) extend the basis of support of the EPRDF, and iii) continue with calls to contributions from the larger society to the war effort, either with troops and/or taxes. Indeed, the war forced the ruling party to downplay the saliency of the sub-nationalities, entailed by the federal model based on ethnicity, and shift to revive skilfully "the old centralist interpretation of the survival of Ethiopian independence" (Barnes, 2003, p. 511).

In conclusion, during Eritrea's insurgency, Ethiopia's emphasis on the need to defend Eritrea as part of the true "civilization" was revived in two ways: i) the long standing medieval myth of the Orthodox Christian Kingdom in Africa: Ethiopia as the bulwark of Christianity against Islamic expansion, and ii) the myth of Ethiopia as the bulwark of independent statehood in Africa against European colonialism. In the two instances Ethiopia's unity in the face of "external aggression" was implicitly celebrated.

Finally, in the myth of being *antimurale*, Tigray, within Ethiopia's historical trajectory, was once again the region where the defence of territorial integrity against external aggression was upheld. The EPRDF/TPLF revived the historical myth used by the *Derg* to counter Ethiopia's northern insurgencies, especially the EPLF.

Ethiopia's historical myth of Adwa purports to its grandeur, power and might as the sole state in Africa to have victoriously resisted European colonialism and defeated a European power. Eritrea's historical myth, in stark contrast, reports to the heroic resistance of its fighters, the martyrs, and their sacrifice to prevent Eritrea from remaining the target of discrimination and persecution from its neighbour.

According to an ex-combatant for the EPLF, Eritrea's conduct during the two-year war was entirely justified. The ex-combatant emphasised Eritrea's stance as reflective of its continuous need for self-defence in face of its powerful neighbour to the south: "Eritrea just wants peace but our neighbour keeps on tempting us" (Interview in Asmara, August 2004).

Finally, the analysis of the inter-state war against the background of the civil war sheds light not only on the understanding of which historical myths were brought back to the fore, but also helps to understand the ones which faded away or were purposefully silenced in the official discourse.

While the EPLF and the TPLF alliance in the civil war against the *Derg* was build on the common experience of oppression and discrimination of Eritrea and

Tigray at the hands of successive Ethiopian regimes⁶, the collective memory of this common experience was totally silenced in Ethiopia during the two-year war. Tigray's martyrs of the civil war were replaced by the region's singular standing as the outpost of the Ethiopian state against external aggression.

The myth of *antiquitas*

Ethiopia could draw more openly on the myth of *antiquitas*. Eritrea, on the other hand, relied on the counter-myth. In this respect, the Eritrean leadership was forced to silence the past in order to be consistent with the historical grounding of Eritrean nationalism on the war for independence. Any claim of *antiquitas* prior to Italian colonization would run counter to the entire edifice upon which the Eritrean nation-state had been legitimately constructed⁷, but the border under dispute was that defined according to the colonial treaties. The borders had crystallized by 1936, i.e. prior to the incorporation of Ethiopia into the East African Empire. The quagmire was that neither the colonial state in Eritrea, nor the modern sovereign state in Ethiopia had fixed borders throughout their existence. Paraphrasing Kolstø: "the borders waxed and waned" over the decades of their political coexistence (Kolstø, 2005, p. 22).

As Triulzi summarized it, the borders changed status frequently since the 19th century up to Eritrea's independence. The border status shifted from mere internal-administrative marker, to a colonial border, to dissolution, to inter-state border during the one-decade Federation, becoming an internal border again, going through a phase of contested no-man's-land during the civil war and, finally, acquiring the status of a national border (Triulzi, 2006, p. 7).

Two points related to the waning of the border after its crystallization in 1936 are particularly relevant. Firstly, the implications of defeat and the period of Italian occupation are not readily acknowledged in Ethiopia, with the exception of references to the external aggression and accompanying patriotism (Barnes, 2003, p. 513). Indeed, as Barnes notes: "The Italian experience, while fleeting, was crucial for Ethiopia's post-war sovereignty" (*ibid.*, p. 513). Secondly, the TPLF alliance with the EPLF in the latter's confrontation with the ELF had implications with regard to the administration of the "liberated areas". During the two-year war not only was the alliance between the two silenced or re-interpreted in light of the previous period of tension in the 1980s, but also the implications of this alliance on the TPLF and ELF confrontation, which contributed to the expulsion of ELF combatants from Eritrea (Jacquin-Berdal & Plaut, 2005).

⁶ Especially during the *Derg's* Red Terror campaign.

⁷ According to John Sorenson, "Eritrean nationalist discourse rarely projects a unified identity into antiquity. Instead, it emphasises a decisive transformation under Italian colonialism" (Sorenson, 1993, p. 42).

Conceptions and practices with regard to the boundaries

Since Eritrea's formal independence and up to the outbreak of hostilities, the local conceptions of the boundaries between Eritrea and Ethiopia and the practices of borderland groups across borders had not substantially changed. The groups in the borderlands continued to conduct their everyday business as usual, but under improved conditions due to the end of the civil war. The groups continued to intermarry and visit relatives on both sides of the border, and to many the border was hardly noticed. Evidence collected especially in the Central Sector indicated that daily practices were based on decisions taken regardless of the border (Abbink, 2001; Tronvoll, 2003).

In the Central Front when hostilities broke out, many ran and sought for hiding places regardless of the border, others were directed by the EDF to Eritrea. Behailu Abebe's research findings suggested that "fleeing the area and panic was the first stage of reaction to the war" (2004, p. 406). Some went to the nearest town in Ethiopia (Adigrat) and others sought refuge in nearby caves and localities removed from the frontline. Behailu Abebe's research showed the variety of coping mechanisms developed during wartime conditions and the different experiences of those who were caught up in the middle of hostilities (*ibid.*, p. 411).

The situation in this border area was different from the situation in other border areas, especially in the western and eastern sectors, where the majority of the residents did not identify with Tigrinya-speaking groups in the two states. In contrast, the norm in this part of Tigray, in villages around Zalambessa, was "fluidity of identity and social boundary markers were invisible or irrelevant" (*ibid.*, p. 422). Humera⁸ (Western Front) did not fall within the border-disputed areas, as the line in this part of the border is clearly drawn along the Tekeze River. However, the town was shelled several times during the course of the war (Hammond, 2004). The citizens of this area did not escape the massive military recruitment campaign and were enlisted. As Hammond's research shows, the new-comers to the area, mainly Ethiopians who had been living as refugees in Sudan until the overthrow of the Derg regime, in order to be fully re-integrated faced similar pressure to other peripheral peoples. Although in Ethiopia conscription is not compulsory, "voluntary" conscription was one of the central components of becoming a good citizen. With the war, the call to take up arms was articulated in the context of the much needed support around the national cause. These new-comers seldom escaped joining the local militia and/ or from carrying out their military "duties". The family's access to local critical resources (land

⁸ Humera is located in Ethiopia's north-western border, in Western Tigray, near the border with Sudan and with Eritrea. The nearest village on the Eritrean side of the border is Om Hajer.

and water) and local services (health and education) was dependent upon the head of household and male member's fulfilment of their "duties" as Ethiopian citizens (*ibid.*).

At the onset of the war it was expected that those affected directly by the war were likely to be displaced not across state frontiers but within their state. Empirical evidence collected mainly from the Central Sector, near Zalambessa and the Irob area, shows that the movement of borderland groups reflected the predominant local conceptions and practices with regard to the border. When hostilities started, the borderland groups sought refuge regardless of the border. Both Eritrean citizens fled to Ethiopia and Ethiopian citizens to Eritrea. Their return to Ethiopia either during the course of or after the third round of fighting is consistent with other accounts⁹ showing how the degree of animosity and hatred grew exponentially as the third round of fighting unfolded. For the first time, since the outbreak of hostilities, the Ethiopian citizens who had sought refuge in Eritrea, and waited for the end of hostilities to cross the border, started to fear reprisals from the Eritrean army, to an extent which had been absent during the previous rounds of fighting (Interview Tygran region, Adigrat, July 2005).

The conduct of the war impacted on the local conceptions of the boundaries that used to be predominantly based on their openness. The introduction of the Eritrean currency (*Nakfa*) had already started the process of transformation of the border. The trench lines built along the border imposed a physical marker of the border, which had an impact on local conceptions and practices. The boundaries became entrenched in notions of obstruction, obstacle and interdiction. In one of the first accounts of the conflict, Abbink rightly claimed that the war "sealed the irreversible secession of Eritrea from Ethiopia" (Abbink, 1998, p. 562). This process was effectively sealed with its transformation into the main theatre of the conflict and with the closure of the border in the aftermath of the cease-fire.

During the hostilities the existence of many websites and on-line forums for discussion allowed the mobilisation and involvement of a key external constituency of the two states: the diaspora¹⁰. Guazzini's research showed how a "war of words" was waged over the Internet. Not coincidentally, the escalation of the propaganda mirrored the intensity on the battlefield. During the third round when the Ethiopian armed forces invaded Eritrea, the Eritrean websites intensified a campaign of hatred against their Tigrinya counterparts south of the Mereb

⁹ Federica Guazzini's research on cyberspace shows that the escalation of the systematic campaign of hatred on the Eritrean part toward Ethiopian citizens in Eritrea coincided with the beginning of the Third Round of Fighting in May 2000. This shift came as retaliation for Ethiopia's invasion of Eritrea (Guazzini, 2004, p. 15).

¹⁰ The article follows Terrence Lyons' definition, i.e., "what defines a diaspora is participation in activities designed to sustain linkages to the homeland" (Lyons, 2006, p. 113).

(Guazzini, 2001, p. 566; Guazzini, 2004). This participation had implications for the debate around the war's background conditions and what its aims should be. The degree and intensity of participation of the diaspora (both in financing the war effort¹¹ and in framing the debate around the war) should not be overlooked. Indeed, this is one of the key characteristics highlighted in the "new wars literature" relevant for the understanding of this "old" war¹².

Lyons has developed reconciliation work with the Ethiopian diaspora and, at the time of writing, is developing a research project on the impact of conflict-generated diasporas on homeland conflicts (Lyons, 2006). The research findings show that members of the Ethiopian diaspora had different conceptions of what the space labelled Ethiopia should be. The three groups offered competing visions of the homeland.

- 1) One group emphasised the overarching unity of Ethiopians and interdependence among the Ethiopian people. To them, Ethiopia represented a glorious historical and territorial entity to which unity and loyalty was owed. For some, this conception of Ethiopia included the entire territory of the currently recognized state as well as the neighbouring state of Eritrea.
- 2) For another group the territorial space occupied by "Ethiopia" included "Oromia", the territory occupied by the Oromo people who awaited their legitimate self-determination. To them, Ethiopia merely represented a geographic concept rather than a source of positive identity based on voluntary association. Thus, for the Oromo, Oromia rather than Ethiopia was their homeland, with clear territorial boundaries.
- 3) A third group shared the territorial definition of the homeland put forth by the first. However, this group shared the second group's resentment from oppression from successive despotic regimes from Northern Ethiopia toward the peoples of southern Ethiopia (Lyons, 2006, pp. 124-125).

These findings call attention to the fact that despite divergences the three conceptions had a common denominator: a vision of the homeland with territorial dimensions.

Pausewang rightly claims that a majority of the urban elite rejected the independence of Eritrea in 1993. With the 1998-2000 war they have gradually accepted Eritrea's independence but in its aftermath still hold that the port of Assab

¹¹ The Eritrean government induced the diaspora's contribution to financing the war.

¹² The "new wars literature" seeks to demonstrate the role of diasporas, under the globalization of communications, in "the funding, techniques and politics of wars" (Kaldor, 2005, p. 211).

should have remained within Ethiopia's sovereign territory (Pausewang, 2004, pp. 144-145). However, a note of caution is required with regard to how far this conception reflects the majority's vision of what Ethiopia should be after Eritrea's independence (*ibid.*, pp. 142-146).

Without the creation of conditions for the borderland groups to adjust their practices across borders within the framework of peaceful inter-state relations, the divergent conceptions of the various Ethiopian constituencies will remain either anachronistic or meaningless. Eritrea's continuity as a sovereign state remains largely independent from these conceptions, but the destinies of the citizens on both sides of the border remain tragically affected by them. For the borderland groups the war and the closure of the border led to a change of practices that, in turn, impacted upon the conceptions with regard to the border and, more significantly, with regard to the "other".

Indeed, the empirical evidence confirms that the war was about the disputed boundary in its relation to national identity.

Conclusion

The article is critical in understanding how the conduct of the war led to a transformation of the importance attached to the various dimensions of territory. Furthermore, the conduct of the war led to the transformation of the war aims on various levels.

Although depicted initially from Eritrea as a conflict between Eritrea and the Northern Region of Ethiopia-Tigray, the war was conducted between the armed forces of the two sovereign states.

The outbreak of hostilities, and the intensity of the violence on the battle fronts during the two-year war, raised the question of nationalities. With the national question at the forefront, the re-definition of citizens of both states ensued. The right of Eritreans living in Ethiopia to dual-citizenship ceased and the war justified their expulsion under unlawful conditions. The Ethiopians from the border areas seeking refuge in Eritrea during the war increasingly faced discriminatory treatment to the point of fearing for their own safety, and were forced to return to Ethiopia during the final round of fighting. From the outbreak of hostilities until the cease-fire was finally signed, significant changes occurred at various levels.

Badme, from a barren strip of land, was transformed into a second Adwa, i.e., new symbolic meanings from an enduring site of memory were attached to Badme. Furthermore, the victory in the final offensive marked the end of a major war of national identity (Clapham, 2003).

Once the fog of war dissipates, the time is ripe to render the war decision-makers accountable for their decisions, even in states where civil society is prevented from participating in the key debates that shape its destiny.

The prevalence of repressive state apparatus and authoritarian regimes in the two countries prevents any initiatives of reconciliation emanating from the civilian constituencies directly affected by the war: the borderland communities and the Ethiopians and Eritreans with links to both countries. Without the opening up of space for civil society to participate in the “healing of the recent past” not only will the borders remain closed but the development of the two countries will be deflected from its original aim: to foster peace and stability, both domestically and in the region, through cooperation in mutually advantageous terms.

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