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Ethiopian historiography and the conceptualization of the country's "internal" and "external" boundaries

Abstract

Historians like John Markakis have argued that Ethiopian history can be read through a centre/periphery dynamic. The Amharic- and Tigrinya-speaking highlands always constituted the hegemonic centre, progressively pushing towards, and then incorporating, the lowlands periphery. Ethiopian history can thus be interpreted through the shifting of its internal borders, and the processes of negotiation and struggle linked to them.

Following Markakis' suggestion, my paper will explore how Ethiopian political philosophers and historians answered to two questions: What is Ethiopia? And where does it belong? The first part of the paper will address the definition of Ethiopia national borders during the process of imperial expansion that took place from the 1880s to the 1900s. The historiography of the period is still highly politicized on a central issue: did Emperor Menelik reunite under his rule a nation that already existed? Or were Menelik's campaigns a process of colonization of peoples that had never been part of the Ethiopian nation? The debate is thus focused on the perceived borders of the Ethiopian polity throughout history. Menelik's expansion marks the transition from the porous and fluid conception of borders typical of pre-colonial African polities, to a Weberian-like conception of territorial fixity. The Ethiopian case study is particularly interesting when it comes to analyse this transition, as the new conception of borders was not externally imposed by European colonial conquest, but autonomously pursued by Ethiopian rulers themselves – either as a defence against encroaching European colonialism (the first historical interpretation) or for the opportunistic desire to take part to the Scramble for Africa alongside European powers (the second interpretation).

The conceptualization of the country's borders has another, external dimension: where does Ethiopia belong? For decades, Ethiopian intellectuals and politicians assumed the existence of a cultural, social, religious and political border separating Ethiopia from the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa. Ethiopian emperors like Tewodros and Yohannes wrote letters to Queen Victoria, asking Britain's help in annexing territories deemed to rightfully belong to Ethiopia: regions as far away as Egypt and the Holy Land. The sense of belonging to the Middle East starkly contrasted with the Pan-African vision of Ethiopia as the symbolic centre of the whole of Subsaharan Africa. Black nationalists and Pan-Africanist thinkers "dragged" Ethiopia towards the African continent, pushing the continent's boundary towards the Red Sea. Indeed, the feeling of an Ethiopian exceptionalism gradually lost its strength, and, starting from the 1960s, Ethiopian thinkers began conceptualizing their country more as African rather than Middle Eastern. The discussion over the continental position of Ethiopia has always been prominent in scholarship about Ethiopia, showing the arbitrariness of the continental boundaries "invented" (in V. Y. Mudimbe's sense) and imposed by the European colonizers.

1. The Grand Tradition of Ethiopian historiography

Up to the 1980s, Ethiopian historiography was by large dominated by what is now generally referred to as a historiographical "Great Narrative". The central focus of this historiographical tradition is the Ethiopian state, and the "ups and downs of what is assumed to be a broadly continuous political organisation, over the space of some two thousand years" (Clapham 2002:38). These thousand years of "uninterrupted" history stretch back to the Aksumite kingdom in the first centuries B.C. – if not altogether to biblical times. According to the *Kebra Nagast* ("The Glory of Kings"), it was the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, Menelik I, who carried the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia and founded a new dynastic line. Menelik I was hence the true heir of Christianity, and Ethiopians were God's new chosen people. The *Kebra Nagast* was put together in the 14th century, probably to legitimize the coming to power in 1270 of a new dynastic line. The new rulers who ousted the Zagwe dynasty justified their newly acquired power by claiming Solomonic descent. The overthrowing of the Zagwe dynasty was framed, in the new official discourse, as the "restoration" of Ethiopia's legitimate Semitic rulers over the Cushitic Agaw usurpers. Every Ethiopian emperor up to the 20th century claimed Solomonic descent – thus validating the role of
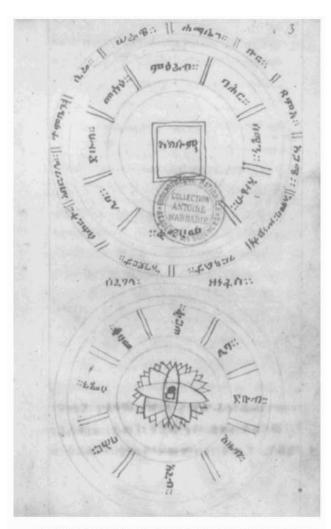

FIG. 3.6. TIGREAN CIRCLE MAP AND WIND ROSE COL-LECTED BY ANTOINE THOMAS D'ABBADIE. Paper and ink from the Kebrä Nägäst. The cardinal and intermediate directions are shown in both maps. The sacred city of Aksum lies in the middle of the top map, and the names of the outlying provinces make up the outer circle.
Size of the original: 22.3 × 14 cm. Photograph courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale du France, Paris, Collection Antoine d'Abbadie, 1859 (no. 225, fol. 3).

the Kebra Nagast as Ethiopia's national epic. Haile Selassie inscribed the principle in the 1955 Ethiopian constitution, whose second article recognized a direct line of descent from Salomon to Haile Selassie himself (Sorenson 1993:23). The *Kebra Nagast* produced an ideological reorientation of the whole Ethiopian geography. The heritage of Aksum became a sought-after cultural prize for successive Ethiopian rulers – the biblical legend offering a narrative of prestige and glory and a very effective means of political legitimation.

The map above[1] shows precisely how the geography of the region was seen as deeply imbued with symbolic meanings. The map is a 19th century reproduction of an original contained in a manuscript of the *Kebra Nagast*. Its upper part represents Aksum (in the square) surrounded by two concentric circles, the inner one with the names of cardinal points, the outer one with names of Tigray provinces. Its lower part represents a wind rose with cardinal points around. The symbolic, rather than realistic, value of the map is evident when one analyses the arbitrary orientation of the circles: the two upper ones are oriented northwards and westwards, the lower one is oriented eastwards. Space here reminds of Islamic cosmological maps, with twelve astral sectors (corresponding to the twelve signs of the zodiac) rotating around a centre of gravity. At the time the map was first drawn, the Askumite empire had long disappeared – but without losing its religious significance as a second Jerusalem enshrining the Ark of the Covenant. Aksum here is the centre of the Ethiopian political and religious universe – the holy core of Ethiopian Christianity and a divinely ordained empire, projecting its power farther away towards the periphery. Besides following "a honoured ethnocentric tradition", then, the form of the map "lends itself to distinguishing center from periphery, believers from nonbelievers, and the known from the unknown in a hierarchical and orderly framework" (Bassett 1998:29). The fact that the map was reproduced exactly in the same way in 1859, centuries after it was first drawn, shows the remarkable persistence of a philosophy conflating history, geography (terrestrial and celestial), religion and politics. The main characteristic of such hybrid philosophy is its conceptualization of a centre/periphery hierarchy, which shaped a significant part of Ethiopian intellectual history.

In particular, the *Kebra Nagast* marks two borders that would define Ethiopian history up to the present day. The first one is an internal border, dividing Semitic-speaking peoples and non-Semitic speaking peoples, Christians and non-Christians. In Edward Ullendorff's words,

> "the historical fiction of uninterrupted line of kings descended from Menelik I, the son of King Solomon and Queen Sheba, has very deep roots in Ethiopia […]. The historical kernel of this legend no doubt derives from the identification of the Ethiopia dynasty with Hebraic-Jewish elements in the Abyssinian past and their insistence on the Semitic, or semitized ethnic relationship" (1966:24-25).

This border took up a geographical dimension as well, as Semitic-speaking Christians settled into the northern highland plateau of the Horn, while the lowlands to the south-west and south-east were inhabited by non-Semitic groups, often Muslim or followers of traditional religions. In Menelik's own definition, Ethiopia is "a Christian island surrounded by a sea of pagans" – a statement that vividly

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[1] Taken from Bassett 1998:29.

pictures the idea of highland fortress constantly threatened by the encroachment of hostile people around. Finally, this internal border was also framed from the racial point of view. *Habesha* (Amharic and Tigrayan) people saw themselves as looking different from the "sea of pagans" around them. Slave-raiding expeditions to lowland areas were common – and physical features commonly associated with lowlands people started being associated with low social status. In the second part of this paper we shall analyse the historical evolution of this internal border, and how the border was constructed from a discursive point of view.

The second border separated for centuries Ethiopia from the rest of the continent. It firmly placed the country within the Middle Eastern cultural area, in the cultural basin where Abrahamic religions were born and developed. The Great Narrative was deeply imbued with a sense of Ethiopian exceptionalism: a deep cultural, historical and even racial border was thought to exist between Ethiopia and the rest of the African continent. The boundary was also disciplinary – in Wendy James's words, the line between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa

> "would make a large circular detour southwards to exclude Ethiopia. This line is an inherited boundary of the colonial imagination, and it unfortunately inhibits communication not only between those who study Ethiopia on the one hand and those concerned with the rest of Africa on the other, but also between historians and anthropologists" (1986:246-247).

The disciplinary separation persists up to the present day, with few anthropologists concerned about highland Ethiopia and few historians interested in peripheral histories.

The Grand Narrative of Ethiopian historiography tended to take these two boundaries as certain. After the "Solomonic restoration" in 1270, Ethiopia went through periods of external intrusion (the jihad of Ahmed Gragn, the Portuguese influence, the Oromo migration), and arrived almost at a stage of disintegration during the Zemene Mesafint[2] (1769-1855). The tables turned in the middle of the 19th century, with the rise of Tewodros, who initiated the process of modernization and centralization of the country. Yohannes followed suit, and Menelik finally completed the state-building project: under his reign, so the Great Tradition goes, Ethiopia reconquered all of its lost lands, establishing its present-day borders, and defeated European imperialism at Adwa, confirming its "separate destiny".

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[2] The "Age of the Princes", characterized by the collapse of central state authority and by continuous infighting between different provincial landlords.

The Ethiopian state-building process was not different from that followed by all the other precolonial African states (see paragraph 2.3) – an original core expanding in the surrounding territory. In the case of the Ethiopian state this original core, the northern highland region, maintained up to the present day a cultural and economic hegemony over its hinterland. Because this centre-periphery disparity of power seems to have characterized a good part of Ethiopian history, an interpretative paradigm developed looking at Ethiopian history from the point of view of this relationship. In this paradigm, the terms "centre" and "periphery" are neither geographical nor cultural (despite having a strong geographical component), but rather indicate those who detain power and those who are excluded by it. The Great Narrative, with its exclusive theleological focus on the glories of the Ethiopian state, missed out a good deal on this power relation.

This essay points at the 1960s and, more prominently, at the 1970s as the period in which the two borders underpinning the Great Tradition started being contested or blurred. The Derg regime[3] was built at the same time on the dramatic tightening of mechanisms of state control over the peripheries, and on the "first glimmerings of a representative structure in which various localized 'nationalities' were accorded a distinct identity" (Clapham 2002a:21). Ironically, this form of ethnic representation would provide the basis for the EPRDF[4]'s ethnofederalism in the 1990s. However, historians are pessimist regarding whether these forms of contestation effectively overcame the country's centre-periphery dynamics. John Markakis, for example, argues that none of the successive policies of the empire, socialist regime and federalist democracy addressed "the fundamental political issue that continues to galvanise resistance: the assumed exclusive right of the Abyssinian elite to rule the state and plot the course leading to national integration" (Markakis 2011:5).

Nevertheless, new historiographies emerged from the 1970s onwards – this time the peripheries 'talking back' to the centre. This paper shall trace the history of the Great Narrative, and of the counter-historiographies emerging from the 1970s onwards. The focus shall remain on Ethiopia's internal and external border, and the way they were variously conceptualized in time. Two questions will frame our investigation – the first about the idea of 'Ethiopia' itself: how can 'Ethiopia' and 'Ethiopianness' be defined? What does 'Ethiopia' mean? The second investigation is about Ethiopia's placement on the world map: is Ethiopian really African? And is Ethiopia really unique within the African continent?

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3 Socialist-inspired military regime led by Mengistu Haile Mariam. It ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991.
4 Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, an alliance of independentist movements that toppled Mengistu in 1991, promulgated a new constitution based on ethnic federalism in 1994 and has been ruling the country ever since.

2. What is Ethiopia?

2.1 The internal borders: Ethio-centric discourse

Menelik engaged in a process of military conquest that eventually doubled the size of the Ethiopian empire. When Menelik was enthroned king of Shoa[5] the empire was mostly confined to the highlands regions of Ethiopia; by the time of his death in 1913 it incorporated vast territories of the lowlands regions of the Horn, southwards, westwards and eastwards of the traditional highland core of the Abyssinian empire. Such newly-annexed territories were, for the most part, inhabited by non-*Habesha*, non-Semitic people: Oromo, Gurage, Afar, Somali, Gurage, Kaffa, Nuer, Sidama, Konso, and many more. As a consequence of Menelik's conquest, these people lost their independence and have been subjected to the rule of Addis Ababa ever since. From the perspective of the Grand Narrative, the expansion, as it is invariably described (Markakis 2011:93), was the final stage in the struggle for the reunification of Ethiopia. Menelik's newly conquered borders were projected back in time as the ancient borders of the country – and thus were naturalized in a process of historical authentication: Menelik had just restored what had always been the geographical identity of Ethiopia. Historians of the Great Tradition uniformly celebrated Menelik's expansion as the moment in which Ethiopia finally re-gained its territorial unity (Markakis 2011:6). In the words of Teferra Haile Selassie: "Menelik, during his long years reign, restored and united most of the medieval territories of Ethiopia" (1997:36). Similarly, Getachew Haile similarly observes that: "this region [the Horn of Africa] had been under the control of the Emperors of Ethiopia from about the beginning of the Christian era until the revolt of the vassal king of Adal, Grany [Ahmed Gragn], in the sixteenth century, and the subsequent invasion of the Horn by the Oromo and the Somali" (1986:465).

The Great Narrative puts forward a peculiar idea of national borders: projected into the past and based on symbols of antiquity. Ethiopia, so this narrative goes, was born out of divine will in a biblical past, and has always existed as a nation ever since. This nationalistic interpretation stresses the cultural and territorial unity of the country, its continuity and "uninterrupted" history (which had made some historians wonder which history is *not* "uninterrupted"). Sorenson summarizes this ideological attitude in the following terms: "those who see themselves as Ethiopians, particularly those identifying with the Amhara culture […] typically subscribe to a narrative of history that projects a unified territory and identity into a distant past" (1993:39). Such "antimaterialist paradigm" (Sorenson 1993:72) tends to flatten the present onto the past, and the past onto the present: the past is used to justify present-day ideologies and policies, and present-day ideologies

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[5] Region situated in the middle of Ethiopia's highland plateau, where present-day Addis Ababa is situated. It used to be an independent kingdom within the Ethiopian Empire.

and policies modify the interpretation of the past. It is "history written backwards" (Reid 2011:110), underpinned by the assumption that, if something was in a certain way in the past, then it must remain in that way in the present, or be "restored" to its original authenticity. Not dissimilarly, contemporary debates and ideas are projected back into the past – first and foremost that of "Ethiopia", a concept that for centuries hardly existed in the consciousness of historical actors. This narrow focus ends up emphasizing, in Ethiopia's history, only those episodes that can be used to glorify the Ethiopian state (Clapham 2002b:41).

Western scholars also reinforced the idea of Ethiopia as a single cultural area with a unified identity, privileging Semitic contributions and largely overlooking the Cushitic ones. Albert Gérard, one of the major scholars of Literatures in African languages, remarks that "no imaginative literature seems to have been produced in any of the Non-Amharic vernaculars of Ethiopia" so that "the phrase Amharic literature can legitimately be used nowadays as a synonym for Ethiopian literature" (1971:287). Edward Ullendorff similarly denies the cultural relevance of two thirds of Ethiopian population, claiming that "Amharic and Tigrai are the virtually exclusive carriers of Ethiopian civilization, literature and intellectual prestige" (1966:31).

The border between the Semitic and Cushitic element was reinforced by the suggestion of some Western scholars that the Aksumite kingdom was initiated by Semitic migrants from South Arabia. The prejudice that native African people could not have created such an advanced civilization seems to have informed some early supporters of the "whitening explanation" (Messay 2003:7). The result is the confirmation of the internal hierarchy perceived to exist between *Habesha* and the other Ethiopian peoples – and a fossilization of racial and ethnic labels. Even an apparently minor historical issue, such as the exact location of the Queen of Sheba's reign (present-day Ethiopia or present-day Yemen?), becomes then a polemical debate about the internal Semitic/Cushitic border. The South Arabian hypothesis was taken up by some Ethiopian scholars themselves, and became a central component of the Great Narrative. Taddesse Tamrat, for example, remarks that

> "it is most likely that at the time of their earliest contact with the south Arabians the native people were in a primitive stage of material culture, and lived in small isolated clans or groups of clans with no state or political organizations. This must have given the immigrants an excellent opportunity to assert themselves and easily reduce the local population to a position of political vassalage" (1972:8).

Messay reacts very strongly against the idea of a minority rule of Semitic people from the Arabic peninsula dominating over an indigenous majority – for him, it is on the grounds of this Eurocentric scholarship that the "internal colonialism" thesis developed:

> "the Semitic thesis is to enlarge the disparity between the north and the south. It crowns the already existing cultural gap with a racial connotation to the point of construing the southern expansion of Ethiopia as nothing less than a colonial conquest". (2003:11)

He goes on to argue that the Aksumite civilization was by all means an indigenous one, much more advanced than South Arabian societies. The Semitic and Cushitic component were thus "two component parts [of the Aksumite kingdom] that went separately as a result of a divergent evolution" (2003:17). Both "are part of the same original unity" and need to be "reunited" (2003:17).

This essay agrees that Western scholarship at times reinforced the marginalization of non-*Habesha* heritage in the history of the country. Nevertheless, we are going to challenge Messay's position from a number of points of view. First of all, the paper will show that a centre/periphery hierarchy was far from being a Western invention: it was in fact widespread even among the so-called progressive intellectuals of the first part of the 20th century. Secondly, the conception of only one internal border differentiating "Semitic" and "Cushitic" Ethiopia appears overwhelmingly simplistic. Many Ethiopian wars have been waged within these areas: the distinction between Tigray/Tigrayan people and Shoa/Amhara people being no less pivotal in Ethiopian history than the Semitic vs. Cushitic one. Messay's distinction completely excludes the Omotic and Nilo-Saharan communities living in the country's Western borders. This is no minor analytical imprecision, as it shows that Omotic and Nilo-Saharan communities are the very periphery of Ethiopianness, to the point of not even being worth mentioning in a discussion on the country's ethnic makeup. Furthermore, Messay's "call for a new and richer Ethiopianism" (2003:17) completely ignores the violence that peripheral groups suffered as a consequence of highland domination (Markakis 2011:89). The economic exploitation and cultural oppression is a historical fact that cannot be overlooked (Reid 2011:87). Its memory is well and alive amongst peripheral people, and it greatly contributed to the emergence of ethno-nationalist movements. Messay thinks that supporters of the internal colonialism thesis are all culturally alienated, and passively adopt Western historical theories. Yet, there is also a socio-political aspect to the equation, and, regardless of the "original ethnic unity" of the country, Addis Ababa's centralizing and assimilationist policies did produce the marginalization of the country's peripheries. It is true that many Oromo nationalist historians simply reversed the Great Tradition's idea of an original unity and authenticity, and challenged its assumptions with

equally problematic theories. But Messay does not step out of the Great Tradition either, in his search for an "authentic" Ethiopian past that validates or disproves contemporary events – since the Aksumite Kingdom in 300 B.C. was not based on Semitic domination over the Cushitic majority, so his reasoning goes, Menelik II could not have implemented internal colonialism in the 1890s. Ethiopian identity is fixed once for all in history, and needs to be "restored", "reunified" back to its original unity. This is why for him it is important to reject the idea that Aksum was founded by Semitic people from the Arabic peninsula: Messay proposes a rigid territorial and cultural identity, in which you are either out forever or in forever. If Aksum was founded by immigrants, then it is un-Ethiopian and needs to be claimed back into Ethiopian heritage. But was there any idea of "Ethiopianness" at the time? Was the Red Sea conceived as a border between "Africa" and "Asia"? Was it conceived as a border, between, as Messay says, "us", the advanced Aksumite civilization, versus "them", the underdeveloped Arabic peninsula? Why does a non-indigenous origin detract from the glory of Aksum?

This paper rejects Messay's narrow conception of cultural and territorial identity, showing that cultural and geographical borders were conceived in a much more fluid and dynamic manner throughout the country's history.

2.2 The challenge to Ethio-centric discourse

From the 1970s onwards, the Great Tradition has received much criticism, as the legitimation tool of a centralist regime that was at its most oppressive at the time. Counter-narratives soon emerged in the form of Somali Studies, Eritrean Studies and Oromo studies, addressing the histories of peoples usually ignored by the Great Tradition[6]. The question was asked by David Levine whether Menelik's imperial expansion was "a subjugation of alien people or an ingathering of peoples with deep historical affinities" (1974:26), and although Levine opted for the second explanation, after his *Greater Ethiopia* was published in 1974 the historiography of the region increasingly answered in the first way. Menelik's expansion was interpreted as internal colonialism, just like Haile Selassie's annexation of Eritrea was interpreted as a colonialist move.

Whether this new counter-historiography managed to overcome Ethiopia's internal border, this is more dubious. It constructed rival identities, legitimizing their existence with the same tools used by the Great Tradition: antiquity, unity, authenticity. In Clapham's words, it is significant "that the Ethiopian great tradition has become so entrenched in the construction of legitimating state

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[6] As of today, there is unfortunately no established counter-historiography of other ethnic groups. Especially lacking appears to be a historiography of the people of the very lowlands of the Ethiopian state.

ideologies in the region that the devotees of a new state should feel impelled to create a counter-tradition to accompany it" (2002b:59).

2.2.1 - The Eritrean response.

The possibility of Eritrean independence was seen by many Ethiopians at the time as an amputation of Ethiopia's core. One of the best expressions of this feeling is a letter that Tigrayan intellectual Gebre-Egzabhér Gila-Maryam sent to Emperor Menelik in 1899, in which he criticizes Menelik's decision not to have continued his military campaign against the Italians after the victory of Adwa. For Gebre-Egzabhér, Menelik decided to abandon into the grip of the Europeans an integral part of Ethiopian territory, being more interested in consolidating his rule in the southern provinces. Here is an extract from what Bahru Zewde defines "one of the most scathing letters that had ever been addressed to any Ethiopian ruler" (2002:156-157):

> "King Teodoros and King Yohannes […] preserved their mother country with great veneration. But You, Your Majesty, have severed its integral parts completely. […] Even though Your Majesty had power to do otherwise, You are proceeding to tear to pieces Your Mother Ethiopia's womb. […] Either because of incapacity of because of stupidity, You are disposing of Ethiopia as a person disposes of his urine"

And then the final blow:

> "Call your reign Menelik the Second, King of Kings of Galla and of half of Ethiopia" (quoted in Bahru 2002:157).

Or in other words: what kind of Emperor are you, who preferred to rule over the pagan and uncivilized Galla, allowing your motherland (in Gebre-Egzabhér's view, this is clearly highland Abyssinia) to be split in two by foreigners? Never had Ethiopia's internal border been reaffirmed with such passionate and uncompromising sharpness.

Ethiopian writers celebrated Haile Selassie's 1962 annexation of Eritrea with jubilation – for example, in plays like Eshete Damesse's *Ertra kuri, edme laTeferi* ("Be proud Eritrea, long live Teferi"), in which the character playing Mother Ethiopia welcomes back Eritrea, in a happy reunion after years of tribulation (Kane 1975:180). Yet, there was an intrinsic ambiguity in the way Eritrea was historically represented. Although Ethiopian historians claimed that Eritrea had always been part of Ethiopia, at the same time they imply that with the 1962 annexation, Ethiopia finally gained the long-cherished access to the sea. But if Ethiopia had never had access to the sea, how could it include Eritrea in its domains? It appears evident that labels like "Ethiopia" and "Eritrea" are here

used in a non-historical way, trying to legitimize, Grand Narrative-style, a contemporary configuration of power on the grounds of its antiquity. More importantly, they projected present-day conception of state borders to a past where a very different conception was in place. Pre-modern borders were porous, flexible, and no map existed demarcating an 'Eritrean province' within 'mother Abyssinia'. No map existed marking the border, except for Italian ones much later on in time; and the Italians inflated their territorial conquests in their cartography, including in their colonial territories stretches of land that at the time were not under their control. This caused a good number of disputes, when, in an era in which the international system of sovereign states was based above all on clearly demarcated territories. Eritrean scholars opposed the Great Narrative by rejecting the antiquity argument and pointing at the transformative effect of Italian colonialism in their country. The Italian rule from 1890 to 1941 was a decisive break with the past, and created a new national identity. In stark contrast to

> "the Ethiopian narrative construction of history, with its rhetorical emphasis on continuity, essence, and the use of the remote past as validation of the present, a key theme of Eritrean nationalist discourse is the idea of a decisive rupture that created a new identity, authentic, legitimate and fundamentally different from that of other peoples in the region" (Sorenson 1993:44).

Two different conceptions of national borders clash in the debate. For Ethiopians, the nation is fixed, transhistorical, unchanging. The independence of Eritrea, Oromia or the Ogaden are a threat to the Ethiopian national self: identity must be maintained at all costs (Sorenson 1993:75). Eritrean discourse proposes a very different conception of national borders: identity is constantly invented and reinvented, constantly modified and negotiated in time.

2.2.2. The Oromo response

Whereas Eritrean nationalism is a territorial type of nationalism, Oromo nationalism is distinctively ethnic in character. While the Great Narrative stressed the 'sameness' of Eritreans and Ethiopians to undermine Eritrean claims to independence, the Oromos, on the contrary, had always been conceived as 'radically other'. The same idea of antiquity was used to undermine the 'Ethiopiannes' of the Oromos: because they migrated to present-day Ethiopian territory only in the 16th century, they are intruders in a land that is not theirs. From the point of view of Ethiopian nationalists, since an Oromo state never existed in the past it cannot exist in the future (Sorenson 1993:62). Since their migration, the Oromos have adopted a huge variety of lifestyles, some becoming agriculturalists, some remaining pastoralists; some converted to Christianity, some to Islam and some retained their

traditional religions; some founded states, some lived in loose social structures – and in all this, they mixed with other cultures and mediated between them. Clapham defines the Oromos as an interstitial people, blurring cultural boundaries, interacting with all of the other ethnic groups in Ethiopia – and thus veritably acting as the glue of Ethiopian multiculturalism (2002b:49). This history of diversity could provide a great way to overcome Ethiopia's internal border, promoting the country's rich, varied and hybrid cultural heritage.

Ethno-nationalism, though, led Oromo historians to search for an authentic source of Oromonness, for a single definition of Oromo identity that could provide the basis for anti-Amhara ethnic solidarity. Against the focus on national unity of the Great Narrative, Oromo historians like Mohammed Hassen (1990) and Asafa Jalata (1993) chose to emphasize the unity of the Oromos: different Oromo kingdoms were, too, in a process of uniting in a single, centralized Oromo state, but this process of state formation was interrupted by Abyssinian colonialism. Oromo historians struggled to create new unified national identity (Sorenson 1993:62) rather than celebrating the diversity, adaptability, tolerance and cultural openness typical of Oromo history. Despite Oromo people were the ones that more vividly contributed to blurring Ethiopia's internal border, Oromo historians construct a unique and separate identity for them. In so doing, they ended up reinforcing such internal boundary – quite ironically, the same boundary that caused the discrimination and cultural oppression Oromo historians declare to fight against.

2.3 Mutability vs. fixity of borders

The first reaction to the Great Narrative was thus to stress the power relation existing between the core of the Empire and its politically and scholarly marginalized outskirts. However, both the Great Tradition and the nationalist reactions to it are based on a distorted vision of pre-colonial borders. Herbst (2000) argued that power in pre-colonial Africa was nonterritorial. Population density remained very low throughout Africa's pre-colonial history, and therefore land was plentiful. Agriculture was extensive and rain-fed, with low levels of investments in any particular piece of land and low levels of productivity – a circumstance that also made the land not particularly valuable (Herbst 2000:38). This led African rulers to accept a "far more nuanced understanding of control of territory", and to tolerate a high level of "ambiguity in demarcating control over territory" (Herbst 2000:41). African states invariably derived from core zones until they were stopped by the "progressive weakening of the force that can be projected from the core, into poorer and less densely settled peripheries" (Clapham 2002b:10). The abundance of land and low population density made it difficult to project power, especially in peripheral areas, as it was very easy for discontented people to split off, move out and settle down further away. Thus African states "seldom possessed

fixed boundaries (which arise when the power of one state is checked by that of neighbouring states), but spread out from the core into hinterlands of tributary rule and mere raiding, which expanded or contracted with the strength of the ruler" (Clapham 2002b:10). The conception of "control" was structured over a gradient of power rather than an absolute of power, in a concentric pattern from central areas of direct control, to "assimilated and politically integrated dependencies", to "vassal polities", "tribute-paying polities" and areas in which tribute could be extracted only sporadically through raids or pillage (Kopytoff 1987:29). This was possible especially because of the conceptual separation between control of the land and control of the people – the latter being possible even if the former was lacking (Herbst 2000:40). Overall, African polities were incredibly dynamic entities, both in terms of permeability of boundaries and in cultural terms: "because the broadcasting of power was constrained, there was much more cultural diversity even within pre-colonial empires than in later European empires" (Herbst 2000:44).

Precolonial African cartography confirms such conception of power. Unconcerned with realism and topography, maps represented the symbolic contents of power and the political significance of territory. The map of Aksum in paragraph 1 is a case in point, as it perfectly conforms to an African cartographical tradition that "used landscape references to express ideas about identity, migration histories, mythology, and relationships with spiritual forces" (Austen 2001). In the map of Aksum, just like in other precolonial maps, power is represented as radiating from a well-defined centre. The peripheries are often much more compressed and represented inattentively with much less detail. And often, there are no political borders at all – the map of Ethiopia on the left[7], drawn at the end of the 19th century from an official in Ras Makonnen's camp, appears completely unconcerned with territorial boundaries, and once again places the centre of power (Entotto) in the middle of the map.
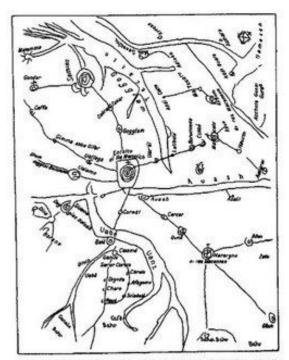

FIG. 3.22. MAP OF ETHIOPIA ATTRIBUTED TO "THE CAMP OF RAS MAKONNEN," 1899. Entotto (Intotto), an early location of Ethiopia's capital, lies at the center of the map. North is at the top.
Size of the original: unknown. From Carlo Conti Rossini, "Geographica," *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 3 (1943): 167–99, esp. 174 (fig. 9).

Recent Ethiopian scholarship has contested the existence of a rigid hierarchy between a well-defined centre and a well-defined periphery. John Markakis (2011) conceives power in Ethiopia in the

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[7] Taken from Bassett 1998:47.

concentric way theorized by Herbst for pre-colonial states, with gradients of integration radiating from the seat of political power. Markakis thus differentiates a 'highland periphery', to which the Oromos mostly belong, and a 'lowland periphery', such as Gambella. The internal border separating highland centre and highland periphery is, according to Markakis, "one of the last frontiers Ethiopia's rulers have to cross to redress the imbalance of power that marginalizes the majority of its people and is the cause of endless strife" (2011:15). The persistence of this internal border is detrimental to the consolidation of Ethiopia as a politically integrated state. The failure to cross this internal highland frontier makes it impossible, for Markakis, to "forge a system of government based on consensus and legitimacy, and to complete the process of nation-state building" (Markakis 2011:15). But there is a second frontier Ethiopia needs to overcome in its road to nation-building: the lowlands periphery. Here, "the integration process has barely begun", and "no real effort was made to bridge the chasm until the coming of the 21st century" (2011:16). This border divides radically different geographies and lifestyles: cultivation vs. pastoralism, peasants vs. nomads and, often, Christianity vs. Islam or traditional religions. Lying all over the outskirts of the Ethiopian states, these areas are often mired in conflict (and poverty as a consequence) – and the manifestation of the central government lowlands inhabitants see more often is the military. Other than the military, the government is remarkably absent: local pastoralist people do not pay taxes and they rely on themselves for security and on their traditional leaders for laws and justice. The challenge, here, is integrating this periphery without destroying its cultures (Markakis 2011:17, see also Clapham 2002a:22). The power imbalance between centre and periphery led to a recurrent pattern in Ethiopian history: pressures from the periphery caused the centre to split in two, and then to collapse. Only by addressing the deep power imbalance, reasons Markakis, can Ethiopia become a stable polity.

The 'centre' itself is at times hard to define, with power residing alternatively in the hands of Shoa and Tigray – a power struggle that dominated the region's history, from the Aksumite Empire to the present day. The definition of Tigrayan identity itself was contested due to the separate historical process taking place across the Mareb river – producing a split between two different Tigrayan cores, an Ethiopian one and an Eritrean one. The region can be best understood as comprising a multifaceted network of centre-periphery relations, having no single direction. Reid moves radically beyond a centre-periphery framework when he proposes to conceptualize the Horn "in terms of tectonics – a mosaic of fault lines and frontier zones, shifting borderlands which are not peripheries but which have defined the very nature of the states and societies themselves" (2011:20). Secondly, his analysis reveals how the peripheries do have a strong political agency as well. In Ethiopia power not only moves from Addis Ababa to marginalized peripheries – peripheries do, in turn, shape the

centre, both in terms of economic transformation, demographic changes and cultural influence. Reid concludes that "states are ultimately defined by their turbulent borderlands, which are thus not 'peripheral' but are seedbeds, zones of interaction which are constructive, creative and fertile as they are destructive and violent" (2011:21). Is it thanks to this dynamics, Markakis agrees, that "Ethiopian culture today is very different from the Abyssinian prototype. […] The contribution of the periphery to the emerging national culture is undeniable" (2011:10).

Just like borders, ethnic relations were much more fluid in pre-colonial times – and remained so until the 1960s, when movements of ethnic nationalism emerged in protest against the centralizing policies of Addis Ababa. In Ethiopian history, ethnic boundaries shifted together with frontiers, new collective identities being constantly created and reinvented every time the borderlands changed. Confirming once more the creative role of margins, Reid remarks that in Ethiopia "sometimes the communities pre-date the frontiers, which are thus formed by expanding polities, at other times the frontiers have emerged first, and serve to forge the communities" (2011:21). In Ethiopian history up to the 1960s, a strong assimilationist model was in place. The dominant culture was the Amhara one, based on Amharic language and Orthodox Christianity. The idea of ethnicity was mostly linguistic and religious, and any imperial subject who converted to Christianity and spoke Amharic fluently could be incorporated in the ruling elite. From this point of view Amhara identity was open and accommodating, based on a mobile rather than essentialist view of cultural identity. However, it was based at the same time on the systematic denigration of other cultural heritages and other religions. As a consequence, "those whose cultures have been devalued by Amhara hegemony emphasise the power relations inherent in such a national identity, the necessity to commit cultural suicide, and the inability for non-Amhara to ever fully succeed" (Sorenson 1993:69). Tedla Hailé's 1930 MA thesis is revealing of how the Ethiopian intelligentsia was planning to tackle ethnic boundaries in the first half of the 20th century. From Tedla's point of view, the only two ethnic groups that play a relevant role in the country are Amharas and Oromos, and it is auspicable that there be an harmonious relationship between them. There are three solutions with regard to the Oromo: enslavement and expropriation, assimilation and indirect rule (Bahru 2002:132). After having ruled out the first and the third, Tedla decidedly opts for assimilation: "it is for the Galla[8] to become Amhara and not the other way round, for the latter possess a written language, a superior religion and superior customs and mores" (quoted in Bahru 2002:132). After all, the Oromos, given their lack of 'racial pride' and their willingness to intermarry with other ethnic groups, are easily to assimilate (Bahru 2002:132).

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[8] Name by which the Amhara used to call the Oromos, now considered denigratory.

The supporters of such assimilationist policy are motivated by a desire to preserve 'national unity' – which to them means mostly Amhara cultural and political control. It is homogeneity that they seek to achieve, modelling all imperial subjects in the image of their rulers and civilizers. A very good example of this attitude is a memo prepared in 1933 by Sahle Tsedaky, the minister of education at the time:

> "The strength of a country lies in its unity, and unity is born of common language, customs and religion. Thus, to safeguard the ancient sovereignty of Ethiopia and to reinforce its unity, out language and out religion should be proclaimed over the whole of Ethiopia. Otherwise, unity will never be attained. Amharic and Ge'ez should be decreed official languages for secular as well as religious affairs and all pagan languages should be banned" (quoted in Bahru 2002:140).

Lij Iyasu, emperor between 1913 and 1916, seems to have preferred a different ethnic conception of 'Ethiopia'. Since he came to power, he proved tolerant towards Islam, and willing to rehabilitate Muslims in Ethiopian society. He built mosques, married into prominent Muslim families and often travelled to the Somali-inhabited Ogaden – in addition, his father was a former Muslim (later Christian convert). To Ethiopia's establishment at the time this could not be accepted. Inaccurate rumours about the imminence of Iyasus's own conversion prompted the Shoan Christian elite to depose him, and the Orthodox Church to excommunicate him. His military forces were defeated at Sagale in October 1916 – a battle that, for Reid, marks "a decisive moment in modern Ethiopian history" in what would prove to be "a victory for the forces of conservatism" (Reid 2011:131). Iyasus was advocating a blurring of Ethiopia's internal cultural border; a nuancing of Amhara linguistic and religious chauvinism. After his deposition, the border remained. And it was fought upon, in the armed struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. We have to wait until the federalist constitution of 1994 for freedom of religion and freedom of language to be inscribed in Ethiopian law – together with new administrative and political autonomy for the nine newly-designed ethnic provinces. The principles of ethnic federalism had a double effect: on one side, it finally affirmed cultural and linguistic freedom for all Ethiopian people. On the other, though, it fossilized ethnic borders into distinct ethnic provinces. The reform was underpinned by the principle of "separate but equal" which at times created artificial administrative barriers and imposed ethnic labels to porous social contexts, forcing the people to choose, once for all, to which one label swear their alliance to. The result is that from a context of fluid ethnicity and cultural assimilationism Ethiopia moved to rigid ethnic demarcation and cultural devolution. The reinforcement of ethnic boundaries, albeit producing some positive effects, shows the reticence of Ethiopian society in building a truly multicultural

cohabitation, valuing hybridity and finding a common ground for a shared, inclusive 'Ethiopianness'. The internal border, albeit more nuanced, is still in place.

3. Where does Ethiopia belong?

3.1. Ethiopia's external border: conceptualizing Ethiopian exceptionalism

Ethiopia's internal border still seems to play a decisive role in the consciousness of various Ethiopian peoples – but how about its external one? As we shall see in the next paragraphs, the Great Narrative was largely based on this sense of exceptionalism – of being God's chosen people, and thus having a 'separate destiny' from neighbouring countries. The idea of Ethiopian exceptionalism rested on an historical paradigm that saw Ethiopia as isolated from the surrounding areas, and indeed from the world – a paradigm best encapsulated by the often-quoted words of Edward Gibson that "encompassed on all sides by the enemies of their religion, the Ethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten". This sense of isolation appears to have been shared by a good part of Ethiopian intellectuals in the first half of the 20th century – but came to be increasingly contested from the 1960s onwards. Ethiopian and Western scholars alike demonstrated that Ethiopia has always played a central role in a regional network of trade, cultural exchanges, ideological borrowings, religious interactions (Clapham 2002b:51-52; Teshale 1995).

Nowadays, the idea of Ethiopian exceptionalism has been rejected by almost all contemporary historians. Clapham, for example, rejects the 'isolationist' historical paradigm by saying that it only

> help[ed] divorce Ethiopia from its African past. The 'great tradition' is explicitly non-African, even anti-African: its emphasis is on connecting Ethiopia with the Christian and Semitic worlds - with the Red Sea, Arabia, and even the Mediterranean. It is no cause for surprise that many of its most distinguished exponents have been Jewish. Not only Ethiopia but the Horn as a whole are, in their narrative, in Africa but not of it. Eritrean history, of necessity, is still more markedly slanted towards linkages with Arabia, Egypt and the Mediterranean (2002b:51).

He consequently advocates a new historiographical attention to Omotic and Nilo-Saharan people, components of the Ethiopian state that could bridge the epistemological gap between the idea of 'Ethiopia' and that of 'Africa':

> The peoples of the south and west provide - even more than the pastoralists or the Oromo - the human links between the Horn and sub-Saharan Africa; and not until

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their histories have been written will we be in a position to assess the exceptionalism of the Horn (2002b:51).

What Ethiopian historiography has already achieved is to demonstrate, first of all, that Ethiopian state formation follows a very common African pattern. Similarly, Donald Donham has convincingly argued that the label "feudalism" can hardly apply to the Ethiopian past, as, just like in other African states and in contrast with European feudalism, there was no significant cultural difference between lower and upper classes (Donham 1986:8-17). But when was this exceptionalist conception of Ethiopian identity undermined? At what stage in history did the Ethiopians rethink their continental belonging? In the following paragraphs, we point at the role of the battle of Adwa as a determinant factor in reconfirming the idea that Ethiopia had a 'separate destiny' from its neighbours. The nationalism inspired by Adwa was later deluded by the lack of progress in the country – especially when compared to European colonies everywhere else in Africa. The 1936-1941 Italian occupation seemed to prove that Ethiopia, too, was suffering the same weaknesses than other African countries – and triggered a slow process of 're-Africanization' of the country's consciousness.

3.2 The 1896 battle of Adwa: Ethiopia's separate destiny

The distinctiveness of the Ethiopian case stems precisely from Adwa: the first encounter with colonialism was a victory for Ethiopia, which retained its independence while all other African regions were falling under the control of European powers. Adwa then, became the founding myth of modern Ethiopia's nationalism: "in terms of national psychology […] the Adwa victory has continued to instil in successive generations of Ethiopians a deep sense of national pride and spirited national independence" (Bahru 1991:84). The victory was seen to confirm Ethiopian exceptionalism – the idea that Christian Ethiopians were God's chosen people, and thus that their country had a "separate destiny" from the rest of the world (Bahru 1991:84). Although such religious ideology had been feeding patriotic feelings throughout the country's history, Adwa signalled the rise of a different kind of nationalism. Pre-1896 patriotism preceded Menelik's imperial expansion southwards, and thus preceded the establishment of the present-day borders of Ethiopia. Menelik's call to arms in 1895 led to an immediate mobilization in most of the Empire's provinces: "at the crucial moment", Sven Rubenson notes, "Menelik commanded the loyalty of every important chief in the country" (1976:107). The political cohesion with which Ethiopia responded to the Italian invasion was interpreted as the proof of the existence of a shared sense of 'Ethiopianness' – giving credit to the idea that Menelik had simply politically reunified an already-existing nation. The victory at Adwa gave Menelik the diplomatic authority to sanction the newly-delineated borders, and was thus perceived as the birth of an Ethiopian nation-state. In the eyes of the cultural and political elite

in Addis Ababa, then, Adwa firmly placed Ethiopia among the world's independent and sovereign nation-states, starkly differentiating it from the rest of Africa.

Although the anniversary of Adwa is still widely celebrated throughout Ethiopia every year –and although the victory keeps inspiring national pride–, historians have begun to question its practical results. The general feeling in historiography is that the state ruling elite did not manage to capitalize on the victory. Adwa opened great possibilities for Ethiopia, but these were wasted because of the very same nationalism the battle inspired. Self-assured and poised, the country's leaders "did not consider it necessary to build up an arm industry, with all the modernization and reorganization of society that such an effort would involve", especially because "the ease with which Menelik had obtained weapons led Ethiopians to conclude that the nation would always be able to purchase war supplies from eager salesmen" (Marcus, 1975:5). Donald Levine also agrees that

> "Adwa may have served to give Ethiopians a false sense of confidence about their position in the modern world. In showing themselves and the world that they could defeat a European invader with their own resources, the 1896 campaign may have led them to think that their traditional resources could be adequate in an era in which war would be waged with tanks and airplanes" (1996:2).

Such overconfidence led to the "softening of the reformist determination" and to the consequent "deferment of necessary reforms" (Messay 1999:274-275). Only minor, cosmetic changes were implemented. The same sense of self-sufficiency allowed intellectuals to air modernizing views without ever concretizing them in an organic set of practical measures. Although advocating change on paper, this ideological commitment never turned into political activism. Proposals could remain vague and idealistic since Adwa allowed seeing Ethiopia, after all, as already successful and self-reliant. Molvaer effectively summarizes the contradiction by observing that "if one seeks specific indications of the direction Ethiopian authors want their country to take in future, what sort of change and what kind of society they want, one will find that few of them commit themselves to any programme or to any precise answers" (1980:231).

Yet, the more time went on, the more a distance grew between the expected glory of the country and the reality of its perceived underdevelopment. Bahru reflects that "in the end, the balance-sheet may not have been in Ethiopia's favour. Radicals ranging from Gabra-Heyway Baykadagn in the early twentieth century to the unsuccessful coup makers of 1960 bemoaned the backwardness of independent Ethiopia, compared with colonial Africa" (1991:84). Ethiopia's 'separate destiny' started to be seen as a burden rather than a privilege. Adwa became then a broken promise, and the

patriotism it kept inspiring became infused with a sense of unfulfillment. The 'separate destiny' was perceived as a 'separate decline' by some intellectuals, creating a mixed-feeling nationalism based on pride but also on frustration. Referring to the reformist thinkers of the early 20th century, Bahru notices that "in their critique of the backward state of their country, the intellectuals represented a counter-current to the smug confidence that has ensued after the Adwa victory. They advocated a series of reforms in order to give socio-economic content to the political independence that Adwa had guaranteed" (1991:110). These contrasting feelings of pride and frustration characterized Ethiopian nationalism ever since, infusing it with an essential ambiguity. In the early 20th century, then "the imagination of the nation that was replete with exceptionalism reduced sentiments of alterity just as it exacerbated its sensitivity" (Wolde Giorgis 2010:92): Ethiopian philosophy became grounded in an idea of nation approached both with patriotism and disappointment. This constitutive contradiction shaped the Ethiopian conception of modernity ever since. Ethiopian intellectuals came to be driven

> by the cognitive dissonance between an inherited sense of cultural superiority and acute awareness of Ethiopian 'backwardness', by contrast not only with the European states […] but even with colonized African people whom they were accustomed to treat with scorn. (Clapham 2006:141).

This necessarily led to an equally ambiguous relation with the 'Western other' and the modernity it was seen to embody. As the next paragraph shows, the 1935-1936 Italian invasion and occupation inflicted to Ethiopian exceptionalism a decisive blow, and, years later, the Marxist revolution marked a moment of no return, the end of the illusion of a 'separate destiny' for the country.

3.3 The relation with Pan-Africanism

Interestingly, black nationalist leaders extolling Ethiopian centrality in the continent were inspired by, and in turn reinforced, the same narrative of Ethiopian exceptionalism. On one side, Ethiopia was "taken as a signifier for all of Africa" (Sorenson 1993:25), and thus dragged towards the African continent, claiming its leading role in it. At the same time, though, its difference and superiority was reaffirmed: Ethiopia is an African country, becomes Africa itself, Zion, but precisely on the grounds of its historical peculiarities: an ancient tradition of Christianity, the claim of a biblical and divine origin of the state, and the only African state to have defeated European colonialism.

The centrality of Ethiopia for Pan-Africanist thinkers, liberation movements and black nationalists is widely documented (Fikru 2005, Paulos & Getachew 2005). Quite surprisingly, though, few studies document what was the Ethiopian intellectual response to all these attentions.

If one looks at the content of literary (Kane 1975, Molvaer 1980, Gérard 1971) and philosophical (Maimire 2005-2006, Wolde Giorgis 2010, Clapham 2006) production in Ethiopia in the first half on the 20th century, Pan-African themes are consistently absent. In fact, Amharic intellectual production demonstrates a remarkable centripetal tendency. Amharic writers appear eminently interested in discussing internal affairs, such as family life, Orthodox moral values, or relations between different social classes. If they were concerned about what was happening in the rest of the continent, this does not show in their writings. Japan is an object of historical and political enquiry (Calvitt Clarke 2004) – with the ultimate purpose, though, to propose it as a model Ethiopia and suggest what measures Ethiopian leaders ought to implement. Similarly, Europe is often mentioned in Amharic novels, but is never an object of interest *per se*. It is rather probed with the objective of Ethiopian development in mind, so that only those European traits that could prove useful for a discussion on Ethiopian modernization are emphasized. The impression is that of a small cultural elite entirely concentrated on the country's domestic issues. Fikru confirms such 'isolationist' tendency by stating that

> without the backdrop of colonialism, from which Ethiopia was spared for the most part, the pre-war Ethiopian intelligentsia remained inward-looking and provincial. Despite some discursive writings on Japan, […] Ethiopians perhaps knew more about France or Italy than their nearest neighbours on the continent (2005:116).

Ethiopia, after all, exhibited a number of peculiarities that made it stand out from the rest of the continent: an ancient Christian tradition, a seven-centuries-long imperial history of self-rule, the monumental remains of an even earlier imperial civilization, a Semitic language with a native and long-established writing system, a mythical status as 'God's chosen' linking it to the Holy Land in the Middle East, the defeat inflicted to European colonialism at Adwa. All of these elements fed the idea of Ethiopian 'exceptionalism' (in fact mostly referring to the civilization of the highlands area of Ethiopia only) – additionally strengthened by European scholars themselves (Girmai 1999:34). Abyssinian people are described as traditionally seeing themselves as part of the Middle Eastern, and even at times European, cultural area – their history looks north-east rather than south-west towards the rest of the continent. Mazrui argues that "until the 1950s the official policy of the government of Emperor Haile Selassie was to emphasize that Ethiopia was part of the Middle East rather than part of Africa" (2002:84). This became a harsh matter of contention within the black nationalist movements in the 1930s, leading Marcus Garvey to controversially affirm that Ethiopians "regarded themselves as dark-skinned Caucasians and looked down upon blacks as inferiors"

(quoted Fikru 2005:102)[9]. Although scholars and historians have refuted Garvey's accusation, nevertheless "for quite a while, neither modern Egypt nor Ethiopia reciprocated [the] identification with black nationalists" (Mazrui 2004:120).

The Italian occupation marks a watershed in the relations of Ethiopia with the rest of the continent. While the battle of Adwa reinforced Ethiopia nationalism, the post-war debate about the causes of the occupation made apparent that Ethiopia suffered some of the same weaknesses of other African states. This can be one of the causes of the slow spreading of a continental-wide empathy in Ethiopia in the post-war era. Fikru considers the "evolution of racial awareness in Ethiopia in the thirties and forties as a byproduct of the Italo-Ethiopian War" (2005:97). In the post-liberation era "Haile Selassie and the young intellectuals worked jointly to undermine Ethiopia's psychology of insularity" (Fikru 2005:231). "It was the Emperor himself", agrees Mazrui, "who reinitiated the policy of re-Africanizing Ethiopia as the rest of Africa approached independence. Ethiopian self-perceptions have been slowly Africanized ever since" (2002:84). A first step in this direction was acknowledging the efforts black nationalists had made in Ethiopia's defence during the Italy's invasion – an acknowledgment that prompted a gradual identification of Ethiopia with the black cause: "the wartime mobilization [of black activists in the USA and the Caribbean] had lasting effects on the Ethiopian national psyche. The Ethiopians, who hitherto took pride in their insulated national identity, began to see themselves in a global racial context in the aftermath of the fascist invasion" (Fikru 2005:231).

But the shift was not a cultural one, as the war with Italy also prompted a foreign policy realignment. Ethiopians were forced to re-think their political role in Africa, and to search for new diplomatic alliances throughout the continent: "Haile Selassie's strong belief in collective security complemented this newly awakened continental consciousness. […] Tefari well understood the precariousness of Ethiopian independence as long as the entire continent was not free, hence his embrace of the African freedom struggle" (Fikru 2005: 132). Fikru's observation do not fully dispel the doubt put forwards by some historians, who believe that Haile Selassie's move was motivated by opportunistic reasons rather than by a genuine cultural conversion. Peter Schwab (1979), for example, thinks the new foreign policy was based on the Emperor's "fixation on personal glory", i.e. on his willingness to impose his authority over the newly-independent African countries[10]. The fact

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[9] For a refutation of such position, see Fikru (2005) and Teshale (1995). They both argue that race was not an important dimension of Ethiopian politics. The aspect of cultural assimilation was much more prominent, so that people from non-Amhara background could have access to the ruling circles as long as they could speak Amharic and were Christians: the discrimination was mostly cultural, and not racial.

[10] Schwab's interpretation might be vitiated, though, by his positive judgment of Mengistu, which might have led him to diminish Haile Selassie's political figure in retrospect.

that most of Haile Selassie's Pan-African measures were not implemented until the decolonization period in the 1960s might lead to think that they were motivated by a desire to extend Ethiopia's hegemony to the newly independent states and to prevent the emergence of possible regional adversaries. The ascendency of Kwame Nkrumah as a political star in the continent might have worried Haile Selassie, who hastened to reinforce his leadership in the OAU by capitalizing on his political seniority and by presenting himself as a benevolent mediator in the OAU (side-lining, as an effect, Nkrumah's idea of the United States of Africa). Some passages in Fikru's own account might endorse this view, for example when the scholar admits that "national prestige had been the unspoken rationale for providing the scholarships" to African students for studying in Ethiopia (2005:142). Ethiopia greatly benefited from Haile Selassie's Pan-African policies, above all the establishment of the headquarters of the Organization of African Unity (later African Union) in Addis Ababa, which gave successive Ethiopian rulers great leverage in the Organization.

Whilst the creation of a continental awareness was initiated by the Italo-Ethiopian war, Pan-African themes do not appear in Amharic literature until twenty years after the liberation[11], when "the Africanization of Ethiopian political consciousness has reached full maturity" (Fikru 2005:140). Admittedly, some of the writers might have adopted a more decisive Pan-African stance in their political than in their fictional writing. At any rate, this consciousness twist surfaced in Amharic literature well after the early theorizations on modernity. In the early 20th century Amharic writers appear overall unconcerned about what was going on in the rest of the continent, and unsympathetic towards the other Africans oppressed by colonialism. This may ultimately explain the contradiction of their 'acolonial modernity': they did not see any incongruity between the modernity they praised in other European countries, and the condemnation of the colonial attempt they suffered. First of all, their idea of a self-sufficient Ethiopia (idea, as we have seen, born at Adwa) made them assume a difference between their country and the rest of the continent. Secondly, before the 1960s Ethiopia had not yet developed a continental-wide empathy: the interest of the intellectuals was almost exclusively for domestic affairs in the Amharic-speaking area of Ethiopia, and what was happening in the rest of Africa was not a matter of urgent concern. Thirdly, the imperialist drive that inspired Menelik II's expansionist campaigns remained alive in Ethiopia's political ideology, leading to Haile Selassie's obstinate reluctance, in the 1941-1954 negotiations, to allow the unification of the Ogaden region to Somalia, and later to his annexation of Eritrea in 1962. Being imperialist ambitions so strong within Ethiopian ruling circles, it seems unlikely that

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[11] For instance, Berhanu Zerihun's *Dïll kämot bähwala* (1962-1963), Abbe Gubeňňa's *Yäpatris Lumumba asazzaň ammwamwat* (1961-1962) and some of Kebbede Mikael's poems from the same period; for full list se Kane 1975:183.

European/Japanese imperialism could have appeared strange, misguided or outright unethical – as long as it did not question, of course, Ethiopia's own imperial borders.

4. Conclusions

The paper has tried to show how the nation-building process in Ethiopia was conceptualized by successive generations of Ethiopian intellectuals. The process of state formation, in our analysis, was theorized and implemented around two borders – an internal border marking a centre-periphery dynamic in the country, and an external border marking a centre-periphery relation within the wider African continent. While Ethiopia's internal border seems to be still in place, although weakened by policies of cultural devolution and administrative federalism, the country's external border appears to have been considerably blurred. Historians and scholars of Ethiopia have welcomed the 're-Africanization' of the country, and the theoretical undermining of the idea of an Ethiopian exceptionalism. Ultimately, though, what is "Africa"? African philosophers like V. Y. Mudimbe have long denounced the arbitrariness of this conception, an invention of the West that did not exist in the consciousness of people living throughout the African continent. In particular, just like the Mediterranean cultural area has been split in two different continents, the Red Sea cultural area has also been split by European map-makers according to territorial land masses. Just like colonialism imposed around the world a model of state based on clear-cut boundaries, it also imposed a continental categorization that simplified the rich interconnection of borderland areas – flattening diversity and building administrative and political boundaries that ended up separating peoples with deep historical affinities. Ethiopia had a history of fruitful economic and cultural exchange both with what was later categorized as 'Middle East' and what was later categorized as 'Africa' – and, once a continental border was drawn in the Red Sea, Ethiopians were forced to conceptualize their culture as either 'Middle Eastern' or 'African'. In Ali Mazrui's words,

> Cultural similarities between Ethiopia and the rest of black Africa are not any greater than cultural similarities between North Africa and the Arabic Peninsula. Nevertheless, a European decision to make Africa end at the Red Sea has decidedly dis-Africanized the Arabic Peninsula. […] In any case, the tyranny of the sea is in part a tyranny of European geographical prejudices. Just as European map-makers could decree that on the map Europe was above Africa rather than below (an arbitrary decision in relation to the cosmos), those mapmakers could also dictate that Africa ended at the red Sea instead of at the Persian Gulf. Is it not time that this dual tyranny of the sea and Eurocentric geography was forced to sink to the bottom? (2002:84-85).

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