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# A Contested Internal Frontier: The Politics of Internal and International Borders in North–Western Ethiopia

*Luca Puddu*

## Abstract

This article analyses the historicity of the process of state building at Ethiopia's north-western corner. The contemporary conflict for control of western Tigray is the by-product of a long-standing struggle for control of natural resources and trading flows between sub-regional centres of power that played a prominent role in the political arena of the Horn of Africa since the late nineteenth century. In turn, the outcome of this competition is critical to understand the making of Ethiopia's foreign policy toward its neighbours since the second half of the twentieth century.

**Keywords:** Borders; frontiers; politics; Ethiopia; Sudan; Eritrea

## Introduction

The rise to power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018 sanctioned a turning point in the political trajectory of the Ethiopian state. Not only did it put an end to the longstanding dominance of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) on the ruling coalition of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), but also paved the way to a historical peace treaty with Eritrea after the 1998–2000 conflict and the ensuing 18 "no-peace, no-war" years. The transition took a sudden turn in November 2020, when the federal government launched a military operation in Tigray after months of rising political tensions. The federal army was assisted by the Eritrean armed forces and by

the special police of the Amhara regional state. Amhara regional forces immediately took control and remained in charge of the western lowlands of Tigray, over which they advanced irredentist claims since the inception of ethnic federalism in 1995. The conflict in western Tigray, in turn, paved the way to the intervention of the Sudanese army in the contested borderlands between the Setit and the Atbara rivers, along the international boundary with the regional states of Tigray and Amhara. Khartoum's official purpose was to regain control of Sudanese land occupied by Ethiopian settlers and claimed by some Amhara officials as part of Ethiopian territory.<sup>1</sup>

Northern Ethiopia's descent into civil war and regional conflict may appear a paradox for a country that, only a few years ago, was described as an island of stability in a region shaped by endemic violence and state failure.<sup>2</sup> From a domestic point of view, this sudden turn of events has been interpreted as the consequence of the centrifugal tendencies introduced by ethnic federalism or, alternatively, as the outcome of the return to power of nationalist forces determined to reinstate an updated version of "Amhara imperialism".<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, competing claims over western Tigray have been supported by the necessity to re-draw unjust internal boundaries or protect ethnic self-determination. The border conflict with Sudan, in turn, apparently confirms the assumption that regional politics in the Horn of Africa is a zero-sum game, whereby established states invariably pursue linear national interests and exploit the neighbour's weakness in times of political crisis in order to assert regional hegemony. These explanations, I argue, are based on two main weaknesses. In the first case, they overlook the historicity of the process of state formation in Ethiopia, assuming a net distinction between the imperial, socialist, and ethno-federalist political phases. In the second case, they focus only on formal actors and institutions, dis-embedding foreign policy making from social interests and political economy (Hagmann, Pèclard 2010: 545).

In this paper, I advance an alternative interpretation of the driving factors behind the current crisis. My argument is that a strict focus on ethnicity and inter-state rivalry is not a useful tool to grasp the different interests at stake in the conflict. The dispute over what is now known as western Tigray is not simply the result of the competition between primordial ethnic identities carved out of the post-1995 federal architecture, but reflects a long-standing struggle for control of a contested internal frontier between sub-regional centres of power that took part in the making of modern Ethiopia (Yates 2017: 106). In turn, the outcome of this competition is critical to understand the relationship between Ethiopia and its neighbours. The process of foreign policy making of different Ethiopian regimes toward Sudan and Eritrea can also be understood as a negotiating arena involving sub-regional centres of power (De Waal 2015) that manipulated the material and immaterial resources offered by border politics (Feyissa Hoehne 2010) in order to (re)define their position within the political hierarchy of the Ethiopian state.

Armed competition between powerful regional overlords for control of contested internal frontiers and external supply routes was a recurrent feature of the Ethiopian highlands politics during the so-called Zemana Masafent, or Era of the Princes (Crummey 1975). It remained an established pattern of political bargaining even after the re-establishment of imperial authority under Tewodros in 1855, shaping the Ethiopian state building trajectory in profound ways (Yates 2020). A turning point in the history of late XIX and XX century Ethiopia was the battle of Embabo, fought in 1885 between the regional powerhouses of Shewa and Gojjiam. The battle solved the stalemate for control of the agriculturally rich province of Kafa between the two fore-runners for succession to Emperor Yohannes IV, thereby setting the stage for Shewan hegemony over imperial institutions in the years to come. Indeed, the victory at Embabo offered to the Shewan *Ras* and then Emperor Menelik II an open door to the further conquest of the west and the south. This, in turn, brought him into more direct contact with external sources of firearms and provided a critical stream of revenue to strengthen his political and military position in the bid for imperial power (Yates 2020: 75). The rise of Shewa at the centre of national politics also sanctioned a radical shift in the Ethiopian empire's foreign policy orientations. The highlands beyond the Mareb river and the coastal shore of the Red Sea were at the centre of Yohannes IV's concerns. The Tigrayan Emperor promoted a complex strategy of military conquest, land reform, and marriages with local chiefs in order to integrate the Mareb Mellash within the power structure of the empire (Taddia 2009: 63). At the same time, he checked Egyptian and Italian ambitions in the coastal area in the quest for securing a direct access to sea and, therefore, a major gateway to firearms (Uoldelul Chelati Dirar 2021: 36). The transfer of imperial power from Tigray to the southern section of the historical Abyssinian core decreased the economic importance of the Eritrean frontier at the advantage of other commercial routes, paving the way to the formal recognition of Italian sovereignty over Eritrea after Menelik's victorious battle against Italian forces at Adwa (Guazzini 2021: 134). The contemporary dispute between Amhara and Tigray regional states for control of the north-western borderlands can be framed as another fault line in the trajectory of the Ethiopian polity and the broader regional system. To support my argument, I focus on the political and economic history of the Ethiopian north-western escarpment between the Setit and the Atbara rivers, at the intersection of the international boundaries with Eritrea and Sudan, which form an ecological system known as the Mazega. I look in particular at the web of state and non-state actors that insisted on this frontier area from the early XIX century to the present, as well as the implications that this struggle had on the political economy of frontier governance of the Ethiopian state. The case study reminds us that frontier zones in the Horn of Africa "are not peripheries, but have defined the very nature of the states and societies themselves" (Reid 2011: 20). The shifting geography of power in the

Mazega has been a major variable in the ups and down of the relationship between Ethiopia, Sudan, and Eritrea across the XX and XXI century.

Methodologically, this article relies on a set of primary sources collected in Ethiopia, Italy, and the United Kingdom. African sources consist of archival documents and grey literature from the National Archives and Library of Ethiopia (NALE) in Addis Ababa, the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) in Addis Ababa, and the Provincial Archives in Gondar (GPA), capital of the historical Begemder region. Italian sources are composed by business records from the historical archives of Banco di Roma (HABR), which provided credit lines to import-export traders in Eritrea until 1974. British sources consist of government records from the national archives of the United Kingdom (TNA) at Kew Gardens, London.

### **The north-western frontier, c. 1800–1941**

The trajectory of the Mazega fits neatly with the definition of interstitial frontier described by Kopytoff in his seminal work on pre-colonial Africa. The north-western lowlands were an "open area nestling between organized societies, but internal to the larger region in which they are found", featured by the periodical in-migration of settlers who "disengaged themselves from their societies" and became the new rulers in a relationship of inter-dependence with the original inhabitants of the region (Kopytoff 1987: 9–13). In the late 1930s, the Italian anthropologist Ellero described the region as a place of in-migration ruled by outsiders from the nearby provinces of Hamasien – in contemporary Eritrea – and Tigray. One of them, Ayana Egzi, is supposed to have reached the Mazega in the XVIII century after escaping from his home province in Agame, north-western Tigray, becoming the founder of the local aristocracy of Wolkait (Ellero 1999). These frontiersmen periodically gave rise to small polities that interacted with the wider regional system, playing neighbours one against the other in order to survive the hostile environment of the Sudanese lowlands. Their chance of remaining in power depended on the ability to exploit the opportunities of the frontier, which usually consisted in engaging in violent forms of economic accumulation. The pillaging of long-distance trade routes offered the chance to increase surplus extraction in a context of low population density. The enlargement of the tributary base, in turn, was often achieved through raids in search of slaves from neighbouring territories, thereby creating new centre-periphery hierarchies at the local level (Kopytoff 1987: 30–33). Not incidentally, Donham describes the area as the archetype of the Abyssinian frontier and "a model, at least in part, for the one created in the south" (Donham 2002) during the imperial expansions of the late 19th century.

In 1861, the British explorer Samuel Baker depicted the area as a place of asylum for bandits and refugees from both sides of the frontier, "attracted by the excitement and lawlessness of continual border warfare" (Baker 1874: 305). At that time, the Mazega was ruled by Mekk Nimr, a former subject of the Sultanate of Funji who had settled around

Humera following the Egyptian conquests of the early XIX century. The relationship between Mekk Nimr and the surrounding centres of power was paradigmatic of the ambiguous nature of his rule. Nimr paid tribute to the Ethiopian emperor Tewodros, thereby recognizing Abyssinian authority over the area. At the same time, he provided intelligence information to his overlords in the highlands, to the extent that he was described as "a shield that protected the heart of Abyssinia" (Baker 1868: 300). The diplomatic protection accorded by Ethiopian rulers, in turn, was exploited by Mekk Nimr to accumulate booty and slaves from raiding activities against Egyptian garrisons and caravans on the western side of the Atbara river: when the Egyptian army counter-attacked, he would retreat toward the inaccessible mountains to the east. The tributary relationship with the highlands did not mean that Nimr was simply a faithful subject of the Ethiopian polity. Baker reported how the Sudanese ruler relied on the collaboration of the Jalyn Arabs, who acted as his spies in enemy's territory while paying tribute to the Egyptian government itself. The same ambivalent behaviour shaped the relationship between Nimr and the Hamran tribes, who "although nominally subject to Egypt, were well known as secret friend of Mekk Nimr" (Baker 1868: 299). British explorers framed the Mazega as an integral part of the sphere of influence of Gondar, the capital of imperial Ethiopia and, later, of the region of Begemder. In 1847, Mansfield Parkyns argued that the boundary of the Gondarine kingdom stemmed from the eastern side of the Atbara river to the western side of the Setit river. The two riverine systems thereby constituted the natural borders with the kingdoms of Sennar and Tigray (Mansfield 1966: 97-99). This territorial configuration is confirmed by the fact that Nimr himself also paid tribute to Ras Wube of Semien, who was subject to the ultimate authority of Gondar (Abir 1967).

The demarcation of the colonial border in 1902 sanctioned the partition of the Mazega between the Ethiopian empire, Italian Eritrea, and Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (Guazzini 2002; Wubneh 2015). The formal subdivision of spheres of sovereignty between Ethiopia and surrounding colonial powers did not change significantly the patterns of state building at the local level, however. At the beginning of the XX century, an epigone of Mekk Nimr settled again in the plains between the Setit and the Angareb river, establishing his own centre in the small village of Nuqara. Al Imam was a former soldier of the Mahdist state who had retreated into the Mazega to escape British repression after the fall of the Mahdi. The Sudanese ruler reproduced the frontier trajectory of his predecessor. He conducted regular raids in nearby territories under nominal Italian and British sovereignty. There, he recruited slaves that were employed in his own plantations in the nearby of the colonial border, such as in the settlement of Jebel Lukdi. While retaining a large degree of autonomy, Al Imam recognized the sovereignty of the Ethiopian empire in the lowlands, paying a tribute to the rulers of Wolkait and, later, to the Ras (king) of Gondar. In return, he enjoyed the protection of

his highlands' rulers against the complains of British authorities in Sudan, who accused him of disrespecting the colonial border (Garretson 1982).

The rise of Al Imam corresponded with an important shift in the patterns of commercial exchange at the regional level. In the XVIII and XIX century, the most important trading route between Gondar and the external world transited through the border town of Metemma and, from there, across Sudanese territory (Seri-Hersch 2010). This route gradually lost importance since the end of the XIX century, following the repeated wars between the Ethiopian Empire, the Egyptians and, later, the Mahdist. It would never recover from the past glory. Starting in the first decade of the XX century, trade with Sudan found a formidable enemy in the Italian economic expansion from Eritrea throughout north-western Ethiopia. The extension of Eritrea's trading network southward reflected the attempt to expand fiscal revenues for the colonial budget, but was also a tool to promote Italian economic influence over northern Ethiopia in preparation to potential territorial claims (Ahmad 1997). In 1903 the Italians started their plans for construction of a more reliable infrastructural network across the Setit river. New camel caravan roads were established between western Eritrea and Gondar via Nuqara, in the lowlands, while merchants were encouraged to shift their activities from the Sudanese route through a mix of gifts and fiscal incentives (Ahmad 1997: 417). Soon, traders from the Lake Tana region found the northern corridor more convenient than the western one through Metemma, where Indian and Arab buyers offered lower prices for Ethiopian commodities (Ahmad 1997: 424). The improvement of the road system to the port of Massawa was also welcomed by the regional administration of Begemder, which hoped to increase the already significant tribute extracted from Al Imam's plantations in the Mazega (McCann 1990:130). The Italian route was also instrumental in re-establishing the position of Gondar as the major trading centre in the region, placing the city at the intersection of the commercial flows between western Ethiopia and the northern route (Pankhurst 1964: 65-67). That the regional capital was taking advantage from the expansion of trading activities is indirectly confirmed by the fact that, up to the year 1936, Begemder resisted the central government's attempts to establish direct control over the regional custom office, whose head – the *Naggadras*, or head of merchants – remained under the direct authority of the regional administration (Garretson 1979). The flexible border policy adopted by Asmara and Gondar was crucial for the agricultural growth of the Mazega. Once the Italians terminated their policy of indirect subsidies to Al Imam, and the new overlord of Wolkait opted for closing the northern border to economic exchange for fear of the growing Italian influence, Nuqara's fortunes declined accordingly. In 1929, travellers described the Mazega as a sparsely populated area which had lost the commercial centrality enjoyed only a few years later (McCann 1990: 132).

The Italian occupation of 1936-1941 did not put an end to the overlapping territorial claims advanced by surrounding sub-regional centres on the Mazega. On the contrary,

colonial intervention added new layers to this struggle. In 1937 the lowlands between the Setit and the Angareb rivers were placed under the jurisdiction of the new *governatorato* of Amara, which included also part of the northern section of the Mazega around the village of Om-Hager. This administrative setting was going to change in 1939, when the presence of Ethiopian rebels in Wolqait convinced the Italian government of the opportunity to move the area under the jurisdiction of the Eritrean *governatorato* (Dore 2005). This arrangement was supposed to be temporary, but it had nonetheless the effect of reactivating the political links between the regional aristocracy of Tigray and local rulers in Wolkait and the surrounding, setting a precedent for the administrative incorporation of the area within the borders of Tigray in 1995.

### **A contested imperial borderland, c. 1941–1973**

After liberation from Italian rule, the Ethiopian government re-established the pre-1936 administrative map that assigned control of the north-western plain to Begemder. This move was certainly resented in government circles in Tigray, where Ras Seyoum Mangesha was challenging the authority of Emperor Haile Selassie with the tacit support of the British military administration in Eritrea (Erlich 1981). The emergence of a cleavage with Addis Ababa became evident in 1942–43, when Tigray became the battlefield of the so-called *Woyane* revolt (Gebru Tareke 1996). The violent suppression of the uprising did not prevent some prominent Tigrayan officials from embracing the British project of a semi-independent Greater Tigray extended to the highlands of Eritrea. According to the ambassador to London Abebe Retta, who hailed from Tigray, this was the only way to "remove the province from the Amhara yoke" (Calchi Novati 1996: 31).

The territorial dispute between Gondar and Mekelle was also nurtured by the fact that the Mazega was going to experience a new cycle of economic expansion, which was based on the same conditions that had favoured the cash crop revolution of Al Imam fifty years earlier. Since the early 1950s the area began to attract a growing migrant labour force from the highlands of Eritrea, Tigray, and Begemder, which found employment in the cotton and sesame seeds plantations established by foreign investors. In the 1960s, Ethiopian investors followed the example of foreign entrepreneurs and opened their own commercial farms. The western plains between Humera and the Angareb river became one of the main cash-crop producing areas in the country, providing a significant source of hard currency for the government's coffers. This agricultural boom was favoured by the launch of an import-substitution policy that protected cotton growers from the competition of cheaper Sudanese cotton and, most importantly, by the enactment of the federation with Eritrea in 1952. Sesame seeds from the Humera area could now be exported through Asmara and the port of Massawa without additional fees, while cotton was sold to the recently established textile factories in Asmara and, to a lesser extent, Bahr Dahr, near Gondar. Sorghum, finally, provided an important

contribution to the subsistence economy of the highlands, though commercial profits were very low compared to the high transportation cost.<sup>4</sup>

The regional centres of Begemder, Eritrea and Tigray had different interests at stake in the Mazega. For Tigray, the area offered employment opportunities to migrant labourers from the over-populated highlands, while the importation of sorghum represented a safety-net in so far as it reduced the seasonal fluctuation of food prices.<sup>5</sup> The Tigrayan administration was eager to expand its economic influence over the western escarpment. This is confirmed by the fact that local authorities were making pressure on the central government for improvement of the Humera-to-Sittona road and the establishment of a new transportation network between Sittona and Sciré, in central Tigray. When Addis Ababa declined, Mekelle took the matter in its own hands. In 1972 a semi-paved road was opened from Shire to Sittona thanks to the work of the Tigre Development Organization, a parastatal entity headed by the governor general of Tigray, Ras Mangesha Seyoum.<sup>6</sup> The Eritrean administration also had various reasons to look with favour at the re-activation of trading networks with north-western Ethiopia. Not only the Mazega offered an alternative income to Eritrean peasants, but also provided exceptional opportunities for economic accumulation to prominent members of the local ruling class. One should consider that the main trading route to the port of Massawa was the all-weather road *via* Asmara-Barentu-Tessenei-Humera (Fig. 1), paralleled by a minor track built by the Italians from Humera to Sittona.<sup>7</sup> No doubt that the movement of goods and labourers along this trajectory was welcomed by the mayor of Asmara Haregot Abbai, whose bus company enjoyed a monopolistic position in the transportation of selected goods and people between Massawa, Asmara, and Barentu (Fig. 1).<sup>8</sup> The main beneficiary of the economic boom of the Mazega was Begemder. The regional administration in Gondar controlled – directly or indirectly – the process of land allocation, assigning the most valuable plots to members of the local aristocracy and armed forces. In addition, the regional administration was authorized to collect agricultural revenues from investors in the Setit Humera *woreda*, without sharing them with Addis Ababa (Puddu 2017). This explains why Gondar was also making pressure for expansion of the existing road network toward Massawa. The governor general of Begemder envisaged a new highway connecting the regional capital to Humera, the construction of a bridge across the Setit river and the improvement of the road from Tessenei to Asmara. All these projects were listed at the top of the central government's development agenda, at proof of the influence of Gondar in the making of the political economy of frontier governance.<sup>9</sup>

The expansion of Ethiopian farmers in the western lowlands added new strains to the relationship with Sudan, which had become independent in 1956. Relations between Addis Ababa and Khartoum were already tense for the support enjoyed by the armed secessionist movement of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in the Sudanese province of Kassala, where guerrilla fighters had the protection of local authorities. In reprisal,



the Ethiopian government offered a safe heaven to southern Sudanese rebels. According to the Sudanese Major-General Hassan Beshir, interviewed on the newspaper *Al Ray* on 8 September 1964, Addis Ababa provided "assistance which enables (rebels) to earn a living [...] and do not pay attention to the purchase of arms by these outlaws".<sup>10</sup> The route between Port Sudan and the north-western flank of Ethiopia was a critical corridor for the supply of arms to Eritrean rebels. In 1965, for instance, a load of Czech arms was reportedly shipped from Damascus to Eritrea through Port Sudan.<sup>11</sup> Even though the two countries proclaimed their commitment to stop any hostile activity and Khartoum temporarily closed the ELF offices in Kassala in the summer of 1965,<sup>12</sup> rebels continued to enjoy the undercover support of Sudanese authorities on the ground.<sup>13</sup> The turbulent bilateral relation partly explains why cross-border trade between the two countries diminished significantly since the late 1950s, the bulk of north-western Ethiopia's import-export being channelled through Eritrea. The business records of the National Bank of Ethiopia highlight that commercial exchange was mainly limited to the exportation of Ethiopian coffee by Arab merchants based in Khartoum, but these volumes were severely contracted in the following decade.<sup>14</sup> Another reason for the decline of cross-border trade was the dispute over demarcation of the international border between Humera and Metemma (Fig. 1). Addis Ababa argued that the original boundary traced by the British in 1902 – the so-called Gwinn line – was not valid in so far as it did not coincide with the official maps exchanged by the two governments at the time.<sup>15</sup> Khartoum complained that Ethiopian farmers were expanding in parts of the Mazega that, according to colonial maps, were under Sudanese sovereignty. The lack of bilateral understanding on where the international border was soon brought the two countries into direct confrontation. From 1965 to 1970, a joint consultative committee was established to bring forward the demarcation of the boundary line, but with no effect. In the meantime, occasional skirmishes between armed Ethiopian farmers and Sudanese soldiers became the norm. In January 1966, Sudanese troops were accused of illegal border-crossing near Humera, where they arrested one Ethiopian concessionary.<sup>16</sup> In reaction, Ethiopian troops were deployed three miles from the city.<sup>17</sup> The detainee was released after a meeting of the joint consultative committee in Addis Ababa, where the two countries declared their commitment to respect the *status quo* pending the demarcation of the boundary line.<sup>18</sup> Archival sources nonetheless highlight governments' difficulty both to enforce their official declarations and to control their agents on the ground, especially in the surroundings of Humera. This was particularly true on the Ethiopian side, where the governor of Begemder was encouraging the settlement of the lowlands for the purpose of expanding the agricultural tax base (Puddu 2017). The regional administration in Gondar and district officers along the border assigned land leases to former soldiers and police officers in order to provide protection to Ethiopian labourers during the planting and harvest season. In January 1967, for instance, the Police Commissioner in the Sudanese province of Gedaref denounced the

establishment of a new settlement near the locality of Basunda. District authorities in Metemma were accused of allocating plots of land to several individuals in preparation of the planting season.<sup>19</sup> The Sudanese press spread rumours of the encroachment of thousand hectares of Sudanese territory and the construction of a mill by Ethiopian investors in the area, Emperor Haile Selassie himself reportedly congratulating with his fellow nationals for this venture.<sup>20</sup>

The border dispute offered to local stakeholders the possibility to engage in violent forms of economic accumulation under the flag of the defence of national sovereignty. Sudanese troops, for instance, exploited the unclear position of the boundary to pillage Ethiopian farmers residing in contested territories. In December 1966, 300 Ethiopian individuals were arrested at the border point of Jebel Lukdi and 75,000 Ethiopian dollars of agricultural equipment were confiscated.<sup>21</sup> One month later, another 34 Ethiopian settlers were arrested and moved to Gedarif prison: when the Ethiopian ministry of foreign affairs complained for the event, the Sudanese response was that the area was part of the national territory and exclusively subject to Khartoum's jurisdiction.<sup>22</sup> The same happened on the other side of the border. In fall 1971, the Sudanese ambassador formally complained for the aggressive stance of Ethiopian militias against Sudanese farmers, accusing "vested interests [...] to scare the people in order to advance their own interests".<sup>23</sup>

The border dispute was apparently solved in 1972, when the two countries signed the Addis Ababa agreement. Not only did they convene to terminate their support to Eritrean and southern Sudanese rebels: the Ethiopian government recognized in principle the validity of the colonial border south of Humera and committed to re-activate cross-border trade through the border posts of Eredem and Kima, under strong pressure of the Sudanese government itself.<sup>24</sup> What happened in the following years highlights the divergence of interests between the central government in Addis Ababa and regional authorities in Gondar, as well as the latter's ability to impose their own agenda in the making of Ethiopia's foreign policy toward the western neighbour. The administration of Begemder immediately contested the legitimacy of the border agreement, under pressure of agricultural concessionaires in the lowlands who were supposed to be resettled east of the boundary line.<sup>25</sup> One of the reasons for this opposition was that the re-opening of cross-border trade threatened the profitability of cotton farming, which had been so far shielded from the competition of the cheaper Sudanese cotton. Détente was also resisted by interest groups involved in trade with Eritrea. In January 1973, the Ethiopian police was forced to stop Sudanese caravans from entering into Ethiopian territory, following large-scale protests from traders in the Wogera *woreda*.<sup>26</sup> According to the mob, Sudanese merchants were able to cross the border and buy whatever merchandise for re-export to Sudan. Ethiopian merchants who entered in Sudan, on the contrary, were harassed by Sudanese custom authorities who did not want to renounce to the extra-revenues offered by privateering on land.

In fact, the police reported of several cases involving Ethiopian traders arrested by the Sudanese custom police in Gedaref and spoliated of their goods while *en route* from Sudan to Ethiopia.<sup>27</sup> These accusations were readily appropriated by the regional police commissioner of Begemder, who argued that "if Ethiopians cannot trade, the same should apply to Sudanese merchants. We should boycott trade with Sudan".<sup>28</sup>

Fig. 1: Map of the region



Source: Author's elaboration based on Google Earth  
Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO  
Image Landsat / Copernicus – 2021

### North-Western Ethiopia under the Derg, c. 1974–1990

The rapprochement between Addis Ababa and Khartoum over the delimitation of the international border was short-lived. The Ethiopian revolution in 1974 and the rise to power of the military government of the Derg added new strains to the bilateral relationship. Various armed incursions were reported in the contested borderlands since January 1974, with Sudanese soldiers harassing Ethiopian farmers and taking control of water wells and custom posts such as Embrega.<sup>29</sup> That Sudan was now perceived as a security threat for the stability of the new administration is confirmed by an internal memo of the ministry of the Interior, which accused Khartoum of taking measures that were "harmful to Ethiopian interests, especially in Begemder and Eritrea".<sup>30</sup>

No wonder that the north-western borderlands between Humera and Metemma became again a safe haven for the enemies of Addis Ababa. Rebel groups were authorized by Sudanese authorities to purchase firearms and other equipment, which were shipped through the route via Port Sudan. Armed movements from Tigray took the

lead: in 1976 the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) led by the former Ras of Tigray, Mangesha Seyoum, was able to take control of the Mazega and its sesame harvest, which was exchanged against rifles and ammunitions in preparation of a major military offensive. Once the EDU was defeated by the Ethiopian army, the area became one of the battlefields of the TPLF and, to a lesser extent, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). The western lowlands were critical for the Tigrayan insurgency because they offered an external supply line to nurturing the military effort in the highlands. Khartoum was openly accused of allowing the movement of people, food, and military equipment across the international border, but also of shielding TPLF fighters against Ethiopian counter-offensives.<sup>31</sup> Control of the escarpment was also instrumental in establishing an informal siege against Gondar, whose regional governor was the main architect of the Ethiopian counter-insurgency campaign in the lowlands. In fact, the city depended on an aqueduct in the nearby of Abder-rafi for the supply of fresh water. Internal security reports dispatched to the administration of Begemder warned that the TPLF was planning an attack against the infrastructure, with the objective to cut this vital supply line.<sup>32</sup>

The competition between Begemder and rebels from Tigray was also focused on the control of labour. According to the governor of the Dabat *awrajja*, the TPLF was forcibly recruiting peasants to repair the transportation network built by Mangesha Seyoum in 1972 between Humera and Shiré. The up-grading of the road was probably aimed at facilitating the transportation of food and firearms into the highlands, because rebels were reportedly trying to build an additional branch from Shiré to Adigrat.<sup>33</sup> The quest for coercive recruitment of labour had direct consequences on the agricultural cycle of the Mazega, which could not be supported anymore by the unhindered flow of landless peasants from Tigray and Eritrea. In turn, this had far-reaching implications for Gondar's ability to perform counter-insurgency operations in the lowlands, because soldiers depended on local agricultural estates for the supply of foodstuff. Labour scarcity was also encouraged by the deterioration of working conditions in the recently established state farms: the provincial administration in the Wogera *awrajja*, for instance, reported that farmers employed in state plantations resented the terms of employment and were not receiving their regular salary. It was for this reason that many of them were fleeing towards Sudan, where they were able to find better employment opportunities.<sup>34</sup> For state farms to be maintained in an efficient status, it was thereby necessary to drain every available men from the highlands of Begemder. In October 1979, the governor of the Dabat *awraja* reported that his office had successfully recruited 3,000 individuals that were sent to the sisal state plantation in Humera "according to the quota set by the government".<sup>35</sup> This was not enough to offset the labour bottleneck generated by the activity of the TPLF. One month later, the ministry for State Farms wrote hastily to the Begemder administration, complaining for the fact that Tigray had been able to send only 700 labourers out of the 3,000 originally requested by Addis Ababa. Gondar

and the *awraja* under its jurisdiction were expected to fill this gap.<sup>36</sup>

The northern route with Eritrea remained the favourite venue for the import-export trade of Ethiopia in general and for Begemder in particular. In the 1980s, almost 90% of the country's external trade transited through the ports of Assab and Massawa, in light of the increased insecurity generated by insurgent groups along the route to Djibouti (Dias 2008: 55). The strategic importance of Eritrea for the commercial relations between Begemder and the external world might explain why, in spite of the growing activity of the ELF and the EPLF, regional authorities were careful not to harm the uninterrupted flow of goods across the Eritrean boundary: the only countermeasures to arms smuggling were limited to the imposition of a night curfew for cars and trucks in transit across Humera/Om Hager.<sup>37</sup> Insecurity was nonetheless exploited to justify the expansion of Gondarine sovereignty across existing administrative boundaries, thereby bringing the Eritrean section of the Mazega under direct regional control. The governor general of Begemder argued that, to check the activity of the TPLF and protect local Kunama in south-western Eritrea, it was necessary to redraw the internal border between Begemder and the former Italian colony, moving the Gash Setit province under the jurisdiction of Gondar.<sup>38</sup> This proposal is illuminating of the contested nature of internal borders as well. For the governor, the Mazega was a blank space open to legitimate intrusion, and the colonial boundary an illegitimate barrier that prevented reproduction of the settlement frontier in the north.

A different approach was adopted toward the international border with Sudan. According to the Dabat *awraja* governor, who acted under directives from the regional office, it was essential to restrict commercial exchange to a few custom points under government control.<sup>39</sup> It also appears that military authorities in Gondar exploited security conditions for the purpose of finding new sources of economic accumulation. Ethiopian soldiers deployed in the lowlands reportedly conducted anti-smuggling campaigns along the border, but without informing higher authorities. The reason was that seized goods provided an additional income to their meagre salary.<sup>40</sup>

### North-western Ethiopia under the EPRDF, c. 1991–2018

The rise to power of the TPLF-dominated coalition of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front in 1991 and the institution of ethnic federalism paved the way to a radical restructuring of the balance of power in the Mazega. Begemder was incorporated within the larger Amhara region, encompassing also parts of the former historical regions of Gojjam and Wollo. Tigray, in turn, ceded territory in the east to the new Afar regional state, but incorporated Wolkait and the central section of the Mazega between Humera and Abder-rafi within its new regional boundaries. Officially, the rationale of this choice was to redraw the map of the area on a linguistic basis, in line with the 1975 "Greater Tigray" manifesto (Reid 2003: 383). The legitimacy of this operation was also based on the administrative map introduced by the Italians after

the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936, when the country's internal borders had been roughly re-drafted along ethnic lines (Uoldelul Chelati Dirar 2009: 35).

The new Amhara establishment protested vigorously against the new territorial arrangement, sending their complains directly to the head of the provisional government in Addis Ababa Meles Zenawi. Local resistance was immediately repressed by federal authorities, which launched a military campaign to arrest the most vocal opponents of the plan (Kendie 1994: 94). This was not the only source of friction with Amhara regional authorities, which perceived ethnic federalism as a tool to deprive the region of the western lowlands' frontier. The first territorial re-organization envisaged by the federal government in 1992 assigned the area between Abder-rafi and Metemma to the new regional state of Benishangul-Gumuz, thereby isolating the Amhara region from the international border with Sudan. The hypothesis, however, was abandoned a few years later following a border agreement with the regional leadership of Benishangul-Gumuz (Adegehe 2009: 22). The Amhara regional centre's grip on the western lowlands was challenged once again in the 2000s, when a new ethnic constituency – the Qimant – obtained permission to establish several semi-independent districts in the nearby of Metemma (Kiha Gezahegne 2019: 22).

At first, the institutional allocation of the lowlands south of Humera to Tigray did not affect long-standing patterns of conflict and cooperation at the regional level. The collaboration between the TPLF and the new Eritrean government survived to the end of the war. The former Italian colony remained the main route for Ethiopia's import-export trade. In turn, this commercial flow nurtured a significant part of the Eritrean budget through the trading fees collected at the ports of Massawa and Assab (Dias 2008: 55). The relationship with Sudan, on the other hand, remained tense. The north-western border was closed in 1995 in reaction to Khartoum's decision to provide refugee to three men suspected of involvement in the attempted assassination of Egyptian president Mubarak in Addis Ababa. In 1996, according to local officials from Metemma, a Sudanese military camp was established in what was deemed to be Ethiopian territory, with the result that clashes over land increased in intensity (Kiha Gezahegne 2019: 22).

The deterioration of the relationship between Mekelle and Asmara changed these patterns. The trading flows generated by cash-crop agriculture in the western lowlands became a major bone of contention between party-owned commercial firms connected to the TPLF and the ruling party in Asmara. The regional administration of Tigray operated in the area through the Guna Trading Corporation, a parastatal company belonging to the TPLF-controlled Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray, whose profits funded political and economic initiatives in Tigray. The Eritrean ruling party of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), in turn, had a stake in Humera's trade through the Red Sea Corporation. In 1996, however, Guna was able to secure a de-facto monopoly of the local agricultural market, preventing the Red Sea



Corporation from disposing of farm products purchased at Humera (Dias 2008: 61). The enactment of a new Eritrean currency in 1997 created additional strains. The Ethiopian government suddenly put an end to the free trade policy followed so far and requested all cross-border transactions to be managed in hard currency (Tekeste Negash, Tronvoll 2000: 35-37). The dispute over Badme and the ensuing 1998-2000 war sanctioned the closure of the border with Eritrea once for all, depriving northern Ethiopia of the Massawa sea outlet (Abbink 2003).

The turn of events led Addis Ababa to secure an alternative import-export route to Djibouti, which it found in Port Sudan. In 2002, Ethiopia and Sudan signed a trade agreement to reduce import-export tariffs and improve the transportation network through Gedaref (Fig. 1). Bilateral trade increased dramatically, from 3 million US dollars in 2002 to 2,304 million US dollars in 2011 (Abebe Eshetu 2012: 4). The main beneficiary of this commercial alliance was western Tigray, which had suffered the most from the loss of the Massawa outlet. Now, Port Sudan offered a cheaper transportation route than Djibouti, making the local cash crop economy competitive on international markets again (Hammond 2003: 15). In the following years, the north-western lowlands became one of the country's breadbasket for the production of sesame seeds, the most important oil seed export crop in Ethiopia (Slujjier Cecchi 2011: 15).

In contrast with the past, Eritrea was largely excluded from the wealth generated by this new cycle of agricultural expansion. While the revival of the Sudanese route gave new centrality to Metemma, the main winner was the regional administration of Tigray. Mekelle controlled the process of land allocation, which meant that it could grant large land leases to individuals with the right political connections. Moreover, the ruling party in Tigray was able to accumulate large fortunes through Guna Trading Enterprises, which controlled the bulk of sesame seeds export from Humera to Port Sudan. To a certain extent, the relationship between Mekelle and the Mazega was similar to the one enjoyed by Gondar under the imperial regime. The wealth produced in the western lowlands was largely captured by the regional centre of Tigray, with few revenues reaching the federal government in Addis Ababa. Most of Guna's proceeds were re-invested in the TPLF's home region, while the firm's competitiveness was nurtured by the exemption from export taxes (Hammond 2003: 25). This arrangement, in turn, found the support of Sudanese military authorities on the other side of the border, which were suspected of entertaining secret links to Guna Trading Corporation itself.<sup>41</sup> Other towns in the highlands of Tigray were advantaged by the commercial alliance with Khartoum. Shiraro, for instance, became the main terminal market for camels from eastern Ethiopia before their exportation to Sudan (Yacob Aklilu, Catley 2011: 21). The position of the TPLF-dominated federal government toward the border dispute with Sudan changed accordingly. In 2007, the two countries entered into negotiation for the establishment of joint military units to patrol the frontier, while also agreeing to undertake the demarcation of the boundary line according to the 1972 Addis Ababa

agreement (Wubneh 2015). In contrast with the past, interest groups from Gondar were largely marginalized from the foreign policy decision making in Addis Ababa. This does not mean that they abstained from trying to affect the actual enforcement of this policy shift at the border. Fieldwork operations for the delimitation of the international boundary with Sudan, for instance, were interrupted in 2008 in response to local resistance (Temesgen Eyilet, Getachew Senishaw 2020: 15). Clashes resurfaced again between 2013 and 2015 along the Amhara section of the international border, mainly in response to the regional administration's policy of encouraging agricultural expansion in the western lowlands to relieve demographic pressure in the over-crowded highlands (Kiza Gezahegne 2019: 23). According to the chairman of Gedaref legislative council, in 2015 more than 50 Sudanese settlements in the contested borderlands between Humera and Metemma had been occupied by Ethiopian settlers.<sup>42</sup>

Opposition to border demarcation was articulated as a legitimate resistance to the expansionist tendencies of a foreign country. According to local narratives in the Amhara region, the TPLF was relinquishing control of the contested borderlands between the Angareb and the Atbara river to Sudan in return for other benefits, such as the recognition of usufructuary rights to TPLF-backed concessionaires in the lowlands between the Angareb and Setit river under formal Sudanese sovereignty.<sup>43</sup> In other words, the ruling party was accused of creating ethnic hierarchies in collaboration with Khartoum, bargaining territorial adjustments in favour of Tigray at the expense of the Amhara constituency. These rumours found a ready audience in the Metemma *woreda*, where the TPLF was accused of supporting Sudanese soldiers in the skirmishes with irregular Ethiopian militias (Temesgen Eyilet, Getachew Senishaw 2020: 18). This rhetoric was also aimed at providing legitimacy to the political economy of raiding. Sudanese soldiers were accused of seizing Ethiopian farms at time of harvest. In revenge, Ethiopian irregular militias often engaged in kidnapping activities against individuals on the other side of the border. That the Amhara regional state was against the foreign policy shift of the EPRDF was confirmed also by the Sudanese ambassador in Addis Ababa in 2015, in occasion of an interview to a local newspaper. The Sudanese diplomat argued that "the regime currently governing Ethiopia came out of the womb of Khartoum. In addition, Sudan is a major export destination of their products".<sup>44</sup> The Amhara regional state, on the contrary, was accused of "not accept(ing) the border line" and providing undercover support to paramilitary forces involved in clashes with Sudanese soldiers.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusions

An analysis of *longue durée* of the trajectory of the north-western Ethiopian-Sudanese borderlands shows that fixed ethnic categories are not a sufficient lens to understand the nature of territorial disputes in present-day Ethiopia. In addition, it highlights the close inter-connection between sub-national, national, and trans-national politics: the



rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea and the border dispute between Ethiopia and Sudan cannot be disentangled from the internal competition between Ethiopian sub-national centres of power for control of the Mazega's agricultural and commercial wealth. The case study reminds us the importance of going beyond a state-centred approach to understand the making of Ethiopia's foreign policy and border politics. To a large extent, the political economy of frontier governance of different Ethiopian regimes in the Mazega between 1941 and 1991 was the outcome of the dominant position enjoyed by Gondar in the sub-national struggle with Tigray for control of the area. Interest groups connected to the ruling centre of Begemder found it more convenient to bring forward their irredentist claims over the western part of the Mazega in order to capture the agricultural wealth of the lowlands, thereby challenging the same validity of the international border with Sudan. At the same time, Gondar had every interest in promoting a free-trade policy with Eritrea, which represented a critical export outlet for the Mazega's cash crops. European and African interest groups in Asmara, in turn, derived direct and indirect benefits from the *pax Gondarina*. The rise to power of the TPLF and the redrawing of the map of the lowlands in favour of Tigray sanctioned a radical shift in patterns of conflict and cooperation at the regional level. The competition between Mekelle and Asmara for control of local trading flows was one of the driving factors – though not the only one – behind the appeasement with Khartoum and the re-activation of the western route. The redrawing of the north-western lowlands' internal boundaries along ethnic lines after 1995 and the foreign policy shift in favour of Khartoum after 2001 did not change the contested nature of the area, but paved the way to the enforcement of Tigray's control over local sources of economic accumulation and political capital at the expense of sub-national rivals.

Historically, government change in Addis Ababa had far reaching effects on the balance of power at the periphery. In the Mazega, the demise of the TPLF and the rise of a new coalition linked to the Amhara establishment paved the way to the *de-facto* re-drawing of internal boundaries according to the pre-1995 territorial map. The same assumption is valid in the other way round, however. The shift of power at the north-western periphery and the re-incorporation of the area under the sphere of influence of Gondar had far reaching consequences on the foreign policy making process of the Ethiopian centre as well. The re-activation of economic and political relations with Eritrea was paralleled by the resurgence of the border conflict with Sudan: these patterns were similar to those experienced between 1941 and 1991, when Gondar had the upper hand in setting the Ethiopian government's agenda at the north-western border. This does not mean that history mechanically repeats itself and that the current stalemate in north-western Ethiopia is the teleological outcome of a zero-sum game. Nonetheless, historical analysis is useful in deconstructing one-sided narratives that explain the current conflict and legitimize opposing claims through a selective reading of history and social categories (Uoldelul Chelati Dirar 2021: 57).

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