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‘Brothers at Peace’: People-to-People Reconciliation in the Ethiopian–Eritrean Borderlands

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The coming to power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in Ethiopia in 2018 opened up a renewed peace engagement with Eritrea and diplomatic relations were restored. Before the political rapprochement, grassroots processes of people-to-people reconciliation in the borderlands between the two countries had been underway for years, gradually eroding officially-produced enemy stereotypes. This article explores how physical borders and boundaries of identity at a local level may be conceived differently from that at state borders or expressions of formal nationalism at an inter-state level. The local level border between the northern regional state of Tigray in Ethiopia and Eritrea has become increasingly porous over the last years, whilst the inter-state border was rigidly defended. The political rapprochement is however disconnected from the people-to-people reconciliation, as the local government in Tigray is at odds with both Ethiopia's federal government in Addis Ababa and the Eritrean government. The formalised peace processes are elite driven, leaving no voice for the people affected in the borderlands.

KEYWORDS war; peace agreement; post-conflict reconciliation; Ethiopia; Eritrea; Africa

Introduction¹

‘Finally, we are once again united, as brothers should be’, declared an elderly person on the streets of Mekelle, the capital of the northern region of Tigray in Ethiopia.² The 1998–2000 Eritrean–Ethiopian war had pitted brothers against

¹ All websites cited in this article were confirmed viable on 19 November 2019.

² Personal communication, 15 January, 2019.

brothers, in a social, cultural, and political sense, and dismembered families and kin-folk.³ After the peace rapprochement and the opening of the Eritrean–Ethiopian border in mid-September 2018, Mekelle was flooded with Eritreans who for the first time in twenty years were free to cross the heavily militarised border to Ethiopia. Tales of reunions of long lost family members and relatives spread like wildfire, and cross-border trade and business were booming. Peace rapprochement and the border opening seemed too good to be true, however, so people from both sides of the border hastily visited each other to reconnect, in case the tides of peace turned.

Since the 1998–2000 war, Eritrea and Ethiopia had been locked in a ‘no war, no peace’ impasse. This ceased in June 2018, when Eritrea’s President Isaias Afwerki agreed to enter into dialogue after a peace offer by Ethiopia’s new Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed. ‘Our desire is to love rather than hate’, stated Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. ‘What we miss is to hug our brothers in Asmara. If we are in love then the other things are minor. And if we do that, we might not need a border’.⁴ Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s emphasis on ‘peace and love’ in his new international relations policies led to the coining of the term ‘hug-and-love’ diplomacy. For his ‘decisive initiative to resolve the border conflict with neighbouring Eritrea’ he was awarded the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize.⁵

In July 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed visited the Eritrean capital of Asmara. He was the first Ethiopian Prime Minister to do so in over twenty years. He was received by an ecstatic Eritrean crowd waving Ethiopian flags. On the occasion, Yemane Gebremeskel, Eritrea’s Minister of Information and a key advisor to President Isaias Afwerki, tweeted: ‘A truly historic moment with memorable watershed events: brotherly embrace of the leaders’.⁶ The visit was soon reciprocated by President Isaias Afwerki who travelled to Addis Ababa to sign a five-point declaration of peace and friendship between the two countries. The agreement led to restoration of diplomatic relations and opened up communications between the two states and peoples.⁷ During the visit, President Isaias Afwerki declared: ‘Words cannot express the joy we are feeling now. We are one people. Whoever forgets that does not understand our situation’.⁸

³ T. Negash and K. Tronvoll, *Brothers at War: Making Sense of the Eritrean–Ethiopian War* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000); K. Tronvoll, *War and the Politics of Identity in Ethiopia: The Making of Enemies and Allies in the Horn of Africa* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2009); T. R. Müller, ‘Borders and Boundaries in the State-Making of Eritrea: Revisiting the Importance of Territorial Integrity in the Rapprochement between Eritrea and Ethiopia’, *Review of African Political Economy*, 46 (2019), 279–93 DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2019.1605590>>.

⁴ Hamza Mohamed, ‘Ethiopia PM Abiy Ahmed Ready to Open New Chapter in Eritrea Ties’, 27 June 2018, *Al Jazeera* <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/ethiopia-pm-abiy-ahmed-ready-open-chapter-eritrea-ties-180627075944024.html>>.

⁵ Cf. ‘The Nobel Peace Prize 2019,’ <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2019/press-release/>>.

⁶ ‘Ethiopia’s PM Abiy Ahmed in Eritrea for Landmark Visit’, 8 July 2019, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/ethiopia-pm-abiy-ahmed-eritrea-landmark-visit-180708083000438.html>>.

⁷ ‘Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia’, <<http://www.shabait.com/news/local-news/26639-joint-declaration-of-peace-and-friendship-between-eritrea-and-ethiopia>>.

⁸ Jason Burke, ‘Ethiopia Hails Its Charismatic Young Leader as a Peacemaker’, *Guardian*, 15 July 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/15/ethiopia-eritrea-abiy-ahmed-charismatic-young-peacemaker>>.

Although the two leaders declared that the border between their two countries was redundant and that they were actually ‘one people’, those straddling the contested border were not immediately reassured about their leaders’ genuine intentions and interests for peace. Wars and conflicts have ravaged the Eritrean–Ethiopian highlands throughout centuries, infusing ethnic boundaries and territorial borders with various sentiments of identity and expressions of power.⁹

Territorial boundaries and manifestations of economic, cultural, and political realms are perceived differently according to context. For instance, the Eritrean–Ethiopian highlands with its ancient indigenous plough-based agricultural system has throughout history placed great emphasis on the control of land and hence on the demarcation of land between that which is controlled by one person, kin group, or village, and that controlled by another.¹⁰ Frequent border disputes over agricultural land between neighbours, kinsmen, lineages, and villages have been common for centuries, and these have infused the twin concepts of physical border and identity boundary with concrete and metaphorical significance. The lowland pastoralist communities of the Horn of Africa, on the other hand, tend to approach the concepts of border/boundaries in a different manner. Although territorial units are broadly defined, there are no clear-cut borders demarcating one person’s or group’s land from that of a neighbouring person or group. There are overlapping zones of interest, with porous borders.¹¹

The highlanders’ rigid understanding of borders is also connected to layers – or scales – of identity (family – kin – neighbouring community – ethnic group – nation), successively embracing larger units of territory.¹² Territorial identity formations were ascribed a socio-political hierarchy, where ‘orders from above’ were to be executed without question.¹³ This was of particular importance in feuds and conflicts over territorial domains, where latent identity categories have been exploited by elites to rally the masses behind their political project, be that for domination at local level or hegemonic control at the centre. Which layer of identity or identity alliance that was made relevant, depended upon the territorial unit, or border, that was contested. When I was doing research in Tigray after the outbreak of the 1998–2000 war, an elderly Tigrayan farmer eloquently explained this context to me:

When the Eritreans attacked us, we did not know what to believe. We used to think of them as our brothers – we have bonds of marriage, trade, and friendship that

⁹ Tronvoll, *War and the Politics of Identity*; B. Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855–1991*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: James Currey, 2002); S. Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (London: Heinemann, 1976).

¹⁰ S.F. Nadel, ‘Land Tenure on the Eritrean Plateau’, *Africa*, xvi (1) (1943), 1–21; A. Hoben, *Land Tenure Among the Amhara of Ethiopia: The Dynamics of Cognatic Descent* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1973); C. Clapham, ‘Boundary and Territory in the Horn of Africa’, in *Africa Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits and Opportunities*, ed. P. Nugent and A. I. Asiwaju (London: Pinter, 1996); K. Tronvoll, *Mai Weini. A Highland Village in Eritrea: A Study of the People, Their Livelihood and Land Tenure During Times of Turbulence* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1998).

¹¹ Clapham, *Boundary and Territory*.

¹² Tronvoll, *War and the Politics of Identity*, 26–9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29–32.

link us together. We were also fighting together as one against the military junta. Now, suddenly they have become our mortal enemies; and our old foes, the Amhara, are coming to our rescue! But, although we are fighting the Eritreans today with the help of the Amhara, this may change again tomorrow; as different kings [governments] come and go, so also will our enemies and friends change.¹⁴

Similar sentiments were also heard among the Eritrean border population and frontline soldiers during the war. As expressed by an Eritrean soldier witnessing the carnage of Ethiopian brethren at the Tsorona frontline in 1999: 'This is so sad. These are our brothers and now we fight them here. We are really one people'.¹⁵

The mass killings and destructions carried out during the 1998–2000 war created deep-rooted animosity between the two peoples, which also affected and reconfigured borderland identities, at least temporarily. Moreover, the political impasse and twenty year 'no war, no peace' situation has furthered an identity schism between the borderland peoples. Are the wounds created by the 1998–2000 war still affecting relations in the borderlands? Or has time, cultural, and religious commonality and joint socio-economic grievances healed the wounds of war among the borderlands populations?

Due to the particular social organisation and hierarchical political structures of the highland cultures of Eritrea and Ethiopia,¹⁶ and the region's deep warring history,¹⁷ the highland population of the two countries apparently has a remarkable capacity to reconcile after conflict, as their common destiny as pawns and victims of war also brings them together. Although people participate in the wars as soldiers and supporters, they are also quick to blame it on political leaders who have fanned the animosity. In this manner, physical borders and boundaries of identity at a local level may be conceived differently from state borders and expressions of formal nationalism at inter-state level.¹⁸ As this article demonstrates, the local level border between Eritrea and Ethiopia has become increasingly more porous, while the inter-state border was rigidly defended. Likewise, shared experiences and common interests among the borderland populations on both sides, started grassroots processes of reconnecting social and identity formations across the inflexible inter-state border. The focus of this article will thus be on observations of shared sentiments of people-to-people reconciliation and commonalities between the Tigrinya-speaking border populations of Eritrean and Ethiopia, contextualised by the nascent bilateral rapprochement. Before that however, a brief overview of the 'active' and 'cold' war will be presented, as well as the political peace

¹⁴ Quoted in Tronvoll, *War and the Politics of Identity*, 1–2.

¹⁵ Quoted in Müller, 5.

¹⁶ K. Tronvoll, *Mai Weini. A Highland Village in Eritrea: A Study of the People, Their Livelihood, and Land Tenure During Times of Turbulence* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1998); D. N. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia. The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1974); G. Lipsky, *Ethiopia, Its People, Its Society, Its Culture* (New Haven: Hraf Press, 1962).

¹⁷ Tronvoll, *War and the Politics of Identity*, *Passim*.

¹⁸ On the understanding of formal nationalism and inter-state borders in the Horn of Africa: K. Tronvoll, 'Borders of Violence – Boundaries of Identity: Demarcating the Eritrean Nation-State', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22/6 (1999), 1037–60.

rapprochement taken by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed after he came to power in April 2018. First, however, some comments on the methodological limitations to the study.

‘Balancing the border’: methodological limitations

This article is based on almost thirty years of research on Eritrean–Ethiopian relations, starting with long-term anthropological fieldwork in a small village of highland Eritrea at the tail-end of the liberation war (1991–3), field visits to Eritrea and Tigray in the interim-period of peace (1993–7), and long-term fieldwork in Tigray during the 1998–2000 war. Since then, I have conducted field visits and research work in Ethiopia several times a year, leading up to a 2017 research project with colleagues from Mekelle University on people-to-people reconciliation in the borderlands. I also carried out field work in the Ethiopian borderlands in Tigray between 2017 and 2019.

Independent critical research is not permitted in Eritrea. Regrettably, I, as well as many other scholars on Eritrea, have been denied entry to the country since the 1998–2000 war. To address this imbalance in empirical data gathering, I have made field visits to Eritrean refugee camps in east Sudan and Tigray. I have also, over two decades, maintained close communication with Eritrean academics, political and human rights representatives, and other refugees in the diaspora. In addition, to canvas the greatest range of personal observations from those affected by the war, I made several field visits to the Ethiopian border town of Zalambessa and its environs. I also crossed the border to visit an Eritrean village caught between the Eritrean trenches and the Ethiopian border, but under military control by Ethiopian defence forces. Eritrean and Tigrayan respondents were generally selected randomly during these field visits. Some, however, were recommended by other Eritreans or Tigrayans.

Fieldwork in border zones may prove challenging as one traverses different political realms. When borderlands are militarised, political and security concerns potentially limit the researcher’s operational capability. They may also restrict informants’ willingness and ability to talk and comment on sensitive issues. My longitudinal studies of Eritrean–Ethiopian relations, as well as my frequent field visits during almost three decades, however, mitigate these methodological limitations.

The 1998–2000 war

The 1998–2000 Eritrean–Ethiopian war was ostensibly fought over a sliver of land, but its root causes were anchored in disputes over history, ideology, economy, and identity.¹⁹ Two sister movements – Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) and Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) – toppled the Derg military junta in

¹⁹ Negash and Tronvoll; D. Jacquin-Berdal, and M. Plaut (eds), *Unfinished Business: Ethiopia and Eritrea at War* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2005); A. de Guttry, G. Venturini, H. H. G. Post (eds), *The 1998–2000 War between Eritrea and Ethiopia: An International Legal Perspective* (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2009).

Ethiopia in May 1991. Whilst EPLF formed an independent government in liberated Eritrea, TPLF, through its coalition party, Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), assumed power in Addis Ababa. The close relationship demonstrated on the battlefields in northern Ethiopia during the 1970s and 1980s soon soured, however, as economic and political competition turned into a hegemonic struggle for dominance in the Horn of Africa.²⁰ Small-scale border disputes erupted in the mid-1990s, as the trust between the two leaderships began to wane. The introduction of the new Eritrean currency in October 1997 and subsequent formalisation of trade between the two countries, put focus for the first time on where the actual border should be demarcated on the ground, as customs and immigration facilities needed to be established.

In early May 1998, a small border skirmish in Badme, a Western plains village in Ethiopian-administered territory close to the Sudanese border, rapidly escalated into a full-scale bilateral war, as Eritrean forces penetrated deep into areas previously controlled by Ethiopia. The Eritrean surprise attack led to the remobilisation of the TPLF's guerrilla army by the regional government to defend Tigrayan inhabitants and territory, as well as the federal army to defend the motherland and its sovereignty.²¹

As the conflict escalated the international community scrambled to negotiate the conflict. It soon became clear, however, that both Ethiopia and Eritrea knew this conflict would be settled on the battlefield, and not around the negotiation table. Ethiopian counter-offensives, first to retake Badme in March 1999, and later in May 2000 on the Tsorona, Zalambessa and Assab fronts, led to devastating losses. The entrenched Eritrean positions were attacked head on by waves of Ethiopian foot soldiers. Tens of thousands of young men perished on the plains of Badme and hillsides of Tsorona. When the Ethiopian military command leadership later assessed the terrible details and losses on the Tsorona front, they reportedly all broke down crying.²²

During the spring offensive of 2000, Ethiopia managed finally to break through the Eritrean defence lines on the Western and Central front lines. The Eritrean government ordered a strategic retreat. At the same time they communicated acceptance of a negotiated settlement and cease fire agreement.²³ Although parts of the Ethiopian military and political leadership wanted to continue the offensive towards Asmara, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi ordered a halt in military operations and indicated a willingness to negotiate. Total Ethiopian losses amounted to close to 100,000 killed and 200,000 wounded, while Eritrea officially lost 19,000. My personal communications with former high ranking members of the Eritrean armed forces indicates that the number might be twice as high.²⁴

²⁰ M. Woldemariam, 'Partition Problems: Relative Power, Historical Memory, and the Origins of the Eritrean–Ethiopian War', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 21 (2015), 166–90.

²¹ Negash and Tronvoll, 1–3.

²² Narrated in a memoir written by an Ethiopian officer present, Tesfay Gebreab, in his book *An account of an Ethiopian army colonel* (published in Amharic). See transcripts in English on <<https://www.tesfa-news.net/general-tsadkan-cried-1998-2000-eritrea-border-war/>>.

²³ Alex Last, 'Eritrea's "tactical retreat"', 26 May 2000, BBC, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/764749.stm>>.

²⁴ Personal communication with former high-ranking members of the Eritrean armed forces.

The Algiers peace agreement

A Comprehensive Peace Agreement (called the Algiers Agreement) negotiated by the United Nations and African Union was signed in Algiers in December 2000, which should have paved the way for border demarcation and normalisation of bilateral affairs.²⁵ At that time the peace agreement was hailed as a success and the international community expressed great optimism for a speedy normalisation of relations between the two warring countries. Soon thereafter, however, the peace process stalled as the parties apparently never truly committed themselves politically to implementing fully the subsequent decisions reached in the internationally driven border arbitration process.

The most important aspect of the peace agreement was handled by the Eritrean–Ethiopian Boundary Commission (EEBC; the Commission), which, on 13 April 2002, made public its ruling on the delimitation of the border. At first, both countries issued statements proclaiming to be the ‘winner’ in the ruling. When it became clear that Eritrea had gained the contested village of Badme and the district of Irob in Tigray, however, Ethiopia protested the ruling. Badme village in itself is just a small cluster of houses without any significant strategic or economic value. However, as this was the site of the outbreak of hostilities and both parties had sacrificed tens of thousands of troops in order to defend and reconquer the village, Badme had – and still has – a huge symbolic significance for both Eritrea and Ethiopia. The Irob, a small minority group defining themselves as Ethiopians, was granted to Eritrea.

Consequently, the Ethiopian government initially refused to implement the EEBC’s border ruling in Badme and Irob, but welcomed the demarcation along the rest of the borderline.²⁶ Since then, both parties have repeatedly accused each other of violating the principles of the peace agreement. The Ethiopian government argued for a more ‘flexible’ solution to the demarcation on the ground, to avoid for instance local communities being divided by the new border. This request was formally rejected by the Commission, which referred to the fact that the Algiers Agreement did not have any appeals procedure. While the Ethiopian House of Representatives voted on 25 November 2004 to accept in principle the EEBC’s decision (through its five-point peace plan), Eritrea rejected any talks prior to Ethiopian withdrawals from occupied territories. Subsequently, in a letter to the United Nations Secretary General of 8 June 2007, Ethiopia ‘accepts the delimitation decision without precondition’; but the frozen political situation between the two countries stalled any initiative for follow-up on the matter.

²⁵ The Algiers Agreement as well as all relevant documents emanating from it, including the mandates of the two Commissions and their decisions and letters, can be found at the website of the Permanent Court of Arbitration, <<https://pca-cpa.org/>>.

²⁶ UN Security Council, ‘Progress report of the Secretary-General on Ethiopia and Eritrea’, S/2003/1186, 19 December 2003: <<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/EE%20S20031186.pdf>>.

Shifting identities during the period of estrangement: 2000–2018

The devastating 1998–2000 war and the subsequent ‘no war, no peace’ stalemate which entailed a sustained militarisation of the border on both sides, kept the borderlands populations physically apart for twenty years. At no other time during a history which stretches back over 2,000 years has the Tigrinya-speaking highland population of Tigray and Eritrea been separate for such a long period. War and long-time physical and social separation will eventually lead to a reconfiguration of identities that used to be aligned and considered as affiliated groups. Research conducted in a border village on the Ethiopian side some years after the border closure notes that the younger generations have a very different conceptualisation of, and identity towards, their brethren on the Eritrean side, from their parents’ generation.²⁷ The physical separation has naturally made an imprint on their understanding of the ‘other’ on the other side of the trenches. What used to be conceptualised in terms of ‘kinfolk’, are now increasingly considered as ‘aliens’ by the youth.²⁸ Will this shift in conceptualising identity, however, be a permanent feature among the borderlands population?

Due to the long separation and feeling of betrayal on both sides, many Eritreans and Ethiopians were hesitant about the possibilities of future reconciliation between the two peoples. Lacking any representative study, my impression is that more Eritreans than Ethiopians initially questioned the possibility for broad-based reconciliation between the two peoples. This may be due to a number of reasons. For one, the continued Ethiopian occupation of territories granted by the EEBC to Eritrea sustains the image of Ethiopia as a threat to Eritrean sovereignty. The domestic context in Eritrea has also contributed to and sustained the image of Ethiopia as an enemy: ie social and political isolation since 2000; sustained war mobilisation; and the lack of access to information and narratives other than that produced by the ruling People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).²⁹ This has been countered to some extent: as Eritrean internal grievances increased due to the regime’s repressive nature, more and more Eritreans were saying in private conversations that ‘we – the Tigrinya-speakers – are all one and only separated by political leaders’.³⁰

Ethiopians have, on the other hand, ‘moved on’ quickly after the war. They demobilised their war army, the additional forces called up for the duration, and reprioritised their resources to development projects. The restoration and reparation directive enacted in Ethiopia in 2009, which provides for restoration of property

²⁷ A. M. Dias, ‘Borderless World vs Borders as Walls: Insights from a Borderland Group in Northern Ethiopia’, in *Crossing African Borders*, ed. C.U. Rodrigues and J. Tomás (Lisbon: Centro de Estudos Internacionais, 2012) <https://books.openedition.org/cei/222>.

²⁸ Dias, <https://books.openedition.org/cei/222>.

²⁹ On post-independence political developments in Eritrea: K. Tronvoll and D.R. Mekonnen, *The African Garrison State: Human Rights and Political Development in Eritrea*, 2nd ed. (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2017).

³⁰ W.G.C. Smidt, ‘The Tigrinya-Speakers across the Borders: Discourses of Unity and Separation in Ethnohistorical Context’, in *Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa*, ed. D. Feyissa and M. V. Hoehne (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2010), 62.

rights and compensation for Eritreans expelled during the war, has also shown an official capacity to reconcile and abolish the ‘formal enemy image’ produced during the war.³¹ In addition, as Ethiopia’s challenging domestic political developments are the Ethiopian people’s main concerns, accordingly, the enmity against Eritreans harboured during the war has long since subsided and been forgotten.

The fortified and closed Eritrea–Ethiopia border only had a sustained direct impact on livelihoods in the borderlands and political development in the northern border region of Tigray. This is also the region with the deepest political legacy of the war, as the TPLF was the primary adversary of the Eritrean government. Consequently, when the political power balance shifted in Addis Ababa with the change of prime minister in 2018, so also did the formal bilateral relations between the two countries.

The peace rapprochement of 2018

The coming to power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in Ethiopia in April 2018, at the cost of TPLF dominance over the government,³² initiated a new approach to formal bilateral relations between Addis Ababa and Asmara. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed reached out to President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea and asked for peace between the two brotherly peoples, reassuring him that Ethiopia would respect and implement the Algiers peace agreement and its border demarcation decision. There was no immediate response from Asmara, however. It was not until Ethiopia removed the two most prominent representatives of TPLF control of the Ethiopian ‘system’ – the army chief of staff Samora Yunis and intelligence head Getachew Assefa – that President Isaias Afwerki was convinced that a genuine shift of power had occurred within the EPRDF government coalition.³³ Thereafter, on the symbolic Martyrs’ Day of 20 June 2018, President Isaias Afwerki commented on the political changes in Ethiopia, stating that the ‘end of the TPLF’s shenanigans’ made a peace process with Ethiopia possible.³⁴ President Isaias Afwerki’s statement underlines the thesis that the war was between the Tigrinya-speaking political elites, and had been converted into an inter-state war. The inter-state border subsequently cemented the schism between the borderlands people created by the war, until subaltern processes driven by the borderlands populations gradually reduced the physical and political division.

After a brief period of talks, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed travelled to Asmara and met for the first time with President Isaias Afwerki. Together they signed a brief five-point ‘Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and

³¹ http://nazret.com/blog/index.php/2009/05/25/ethiopia_allows_expelled_eritreans_to_re

³² TPLF voted against Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed taking over the chairmanship of EPRDF: interview with TPLF chair Dr Debretsion in *Financial Times*, <<https://www.ft.com/content/1cbaac04-457f-11e9-a965-23d669740bfb>>.

³³ J. Fisher and M. Tsehaye, ‘Briefing: “Game over?” Abiy Ahmed, the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front and Ethiopia’s political crisis’, *African Affairs*, 118 (2018), 470.

³⁴ Transcript of the speech, <<https://www.eastafo.com/2018/06/19/video-2018-eritrea-martyrs-day-commemoration/>>. President Isaias Afwerki’s statement has been translated differently by different news outlets. For instance *Sudan Tribune* quotes him as saying, ‘TPLF clique, and other vultures’, <<http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article65687>>.

Ethiopia', stating: 'The state of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea has come to an end. A new era of peace and friendship has been opened'.³⁵

Immediately after the signing of the friendship declaration in Addis Ababa in July 2018 diplomatic relations and communication lines between the two countries were restored, and soon Ethiopian Airlines commenced regular flights between the two capital cities. Subsequently, on 11 September 2018, the military trenches were dismantled and President Isaias Afwerki and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed opened the border crossings on the ground, and Eritreans and Ethiopians in thousands crossed into each other's countries to reconnect with friends and families on the other side who they had not seen for twenty years.³⁶ Before this official rapprochement, however, there had been a gradual process over several years of people-to-people contact and reconciliation on the ground, ignoring and undermining the formal enmity between the two states and governments and the solidity of the inter-state border.

People-to-people reconciliation during conflict

People-to-people³⁷ contact and reconciliation between Tigrinya-speakers in Eritrea and Ethiopia has been a continuous subaltern process since 2000, primarily manifested by Eritreans fleeing their country and seeking refuge in Ethiopia. Over 500,000 Eritreans have crossed over to Tigray since the Eritrean political crack-down in September 2001, despite the official narrative portraying Ethiopia and Tigrayans as the enemy. Reportedly, and confirmed by *all* Ethiopian and Eritrean sources consulted over the last eighteen years of research, not *one* Eritrean refugee has reported harassment or vindictive incidents when seeking protection on the Ethiopian side of the border; all informants confirm they had been well received and offered hospitality by the borderland Tigrayans with whom they first came in contact.³⁸ The informal and formal reception of Eritrean refugees in Tigray confirms the close affinity between the two peoples. Both Ethiopian and Tigrayan authorities have gone far beyond the requirements in the refugee convention to host and care for their Eritrean brethren.

The Eritrean–Ethiopian Afar regional state border (in the south-east) has always been much more porous than the Eritrea–Tigray border in the north-west; long stretches are without any military fortification. The Afar, a semi-nomadic pastoral people, are divided between Eritrea, Ethiopia and Djibouti. They consider themselves to be first and foremost Afaris, and hence do not regard state borders as

³⁵ Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship between Eritrea and Ethiopia, <<http://www.shabait.com/news/local-news/26639-joint-declaration-of-peace-and-friendship-between-eritrea-and-ethiopia>>.

³⁶ Hadra Ahmed, 'Ethiopia–Eritrea Border Opens for First Time in 20 Years, *New York Times*, 11 September 2018: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/11/world/africa/ethiopia-eritrea-border-opens.html>>.

³⁷ While there is no official or standardised definition of 'People-to-People' (P2P), the general understanding is that it entails bringing together representatives of conflicting groups to interact purposefully in a safe space. USAID, *People-to-people Peacebuilding: A Program Guide* (Washington DC: USAID, 2011), 5.

³⁸ There are several incidents of grievances expressed by Eritrean refugees in the official camps in Tigray, relating to various issues of maladministration. These incidences are not, however, related to vindictive sentiments by Tigrayan population.

socially or culturally relevant to their own livelihoods.³⁹ Consequently, the flow of people across the Afar Eritrea–Ethiopia border has been more prevalent since 2001; many Eritrean Afars have moved across to Ethiopia and settled there temporarily until the Eritrean political situation improves. Few Afars register as refugees in Ethiopia, as they are looked upon as integral members of the Ethiopian Afar communities. This can be seen, for instance, in the case that over 20 per cent of employees in the Afar regional state administration of Ethiopia, are allegedly Eritrean Afars.⁴⁰

Hosting refugees, however, is not in itself proof of mutual reconciliation between the peoples living in the two countries. For that to transpire, sustained two-way cross-border social interaction would need to take place.

As in any war or conflict zone, smuggling operations across no man's land were soon established. Early in my research I heard details of petty trade and movement of contraband, although it was impossible to verify the extent. Across the north-west Tigray–Eritrea border, informal small-scale livestock trade occurred on and off, when the villagers managed to avoid the Eritrean border guards. Similarly, the Afars have conducted traditional low-scale trade across their border, also in livestock and possibly some commodities shipped in across the Red Sea.⁴¹ As contraband will flow across any border regardless of the political context, such activities can not necessarily be regarded as instances of 'reconciliation'.

The first concrete reconciliatory incidents involving a substantial number of people occurred during the annual Maryam Zion religious festival in Axum, a city in northern Ethiopia. (Conducted around 30 November every year, the Maryam Zion festival attracts tens of thousands of Christian Orthodox pilgrims from across Ethiopia and Eritrea.) Axum locals informed the research team that, in 2009, Eritreans participating in the religious celebration, later returned to their home villages inside Eritrea. Then, in November 2015, several hundred, mostly elderly, Eritreans reportedly flocked to Axum. Tigrayan friends and families there played host to them, before they returned to their home country.⁴² The common Christian Orthodox identity in the Eritrean–Ethiopian highlands runs deep, and transcends parochial, ethnic, and national identities, and is, as such, a convenient reconciliation medium.

Life in the 'buffer zone'

The Ethiopian borderlands have been backwaters since 2000, missing out on the development elsewhere in the country. The border towns and districts have been slowly dying, as the young move to other Ethiopian cities or migrate abroad for

³⁹ G. A-Din Ibrahim Khalil A-Shami and H. Gamal A-Shami, *Al Manhal: The Source in the History and Narratives of the Afar (Danakil)* (Cairo: Harmony Press 2018); I. M. Lewis, *Peoples of the Horn of Africa, Somali, Afar and Saho*, 4th ed. (London: Haan Associates 1998).

⁴⁰ Interview with representative from the Afar regional state administration, June 2019, Addis Ababa.

⁴¹ Personal communication with Afar representative, interviewed Addis Ababa, 27 June 2019.

⁴² Information obtained from inhabitants in Axum.

better opportunities.⁴³ As explained by an elderly farmer in the Irob district: ‘We have failed them. Our community has failed them. Ethiopia has certainly failed them’.⁴⁴

While the borderland population thus has most to gain in development by reconnecting with their Eritrean counterparts, recent fieldwork in the twin villages of Kinin and Kinto on the Tsorona frontline indicates that similar sentiments are harboured on the Eritrean side too.⁴⁵ This area has been militarily controlled by Ethiopian defence forces since a 2011 border skirmish. The Eritrean villagers remained, however, and it is now administered by the neighbouring Ethiopian district (*woreda*) of Glomekeda in Adigrat zone. But the villagers are caught in a precarious situation, always worrying about possible snipers or the outbreak of a fire-fight, as the Eritrean trenches skirt the villages. While visiting the area, our research team had to stay in the shadows on the Ethiopia-facing side of the small dwellings, in order to stay hidden from Eritrean snipers.

Life in the ‘buffer zone’ was full of challenges and villagers expressed their grievances about the lack of opportunities and development as long as the border was closed. After adolescence, the youth crossed the border to the south, either to migrate to third countries or seek educational or employment opportunities in Ethiopia. The alternative of staying in the village or going to Asmara or other Eritrean towns did not exist, since they knew that they then would end up in never-ending National Service duty.⁴⁶ Even so, Geresus (name altered), a farmer in his early 60s, explained that they are in general doing fine as their livelihood is secured with plenty of farming land in no man’s land’s zone:

Although we do not receive any help or assistance from our local [Eritrean] authorities, Tigray administration is supplying us with all that we need in terms of social assistance and health care. And our children attend the local Tigrayan community school, as equals to their Ethiopian friends.⁴⁷

But Geresus grieved for the separation of the two people, and longed for the time when the political leaders would allow the people to reconnect at the grassroots. ‘We see that our children are friends with their Tigrayan school companions as if the war never happened. Hence, if only the rulers could leave us alone, things would get back to normal quickly’.

⁴³ G. W. Gebru and F. Beyene, ‘Causes and Consequences of Out-Migration on Rural Households’ Livelihood in Gulomekeda District, Tigray, Ethiopia’, *Agricultural Research and Reviews*, 1 (2012), 26–33.

⁴⁴ Samuel Getachew, ‘Chasing False Dreams of Success’, *The Reporter*, 17 August 2019, <<https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/chasing-false-dreams-success>>.

⁴⁵ The field visit, conducted in February 2018, was organised by the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation at Mekelle University, with a team of Ethiopian researchers and this author.

⁴⁶ On the National Service policy of Eritrea: G. Kibreab, *The Eritrean National Service: Servitude for the ‘common good’ and the youth exodus* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2017). For the political context and human rights repression in Eritrea in general: K. Tronvoll and D. R. Mekonnen, *The African Garrison State: Human rights and political development in Eritrea*, 2nd ed. (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2017).

⁴⁷ Interviewed 11 February 2018.

In several places in no man's land, children of both countries met while tending the cattle or fetching water from the springs located there. While visiting the trenches of Zalambessa in November 2017, we talked to the young Ethiopian herders. They regularly played with Eritrean children to pass the time. A young boy regretted however, that they were not allowed to visit each other's houses, since they then had to pass the enemy trenches. Playing in no man's land under the watchful eyes of snipers from both sides, however, was allowed and a 'normalised' activity.⁴⁸

Citizens' reconciliation committees

The twin-villages of Kinin and Kinto may not be representative of the broader Eritrean border population sentiment, as the area is still under Ethiopian military control. The interest of Eritrean border villages to reconnect with communities on the Ethiopian side, however, has manifested itself in several ways. For instance, the Ethiopian frontline commander in Zalambessa (the main crossing-point between Eritrea–Ethiopia on the road between Mekelle and Asmara) received a request in 2017 by the three neighbouring Eritrean villages to organise a joint market day for them to buy and sell their produce in Zalambessa. The Ethiopian commander accepted the request, on condition that they also received permission from Asmara in order to safeguard their security when crossing the militarised zone.⁴⁹ No such permission was granted by Asmara, however.

At this time, individuals in Zalambessa and Senafe, the border town on the Eritrean side, were working to reestablish social interaction between the twin border settlements. This was later energised by the formal peace declaration, and citizens' reconciliation committees were established to lobby the authorities for an open border. During the summer of 2018 they started to prepare for the first public joint reconciliation celebration in Zalambessa on 1 September. Being impatient with the sluggishness of the opening of the border on the ground (as only air traffic opened in July), they wanted a public event to mark the new beginning of peace rapprochement at the grassroots. Although supported by local authorities, Zalambessa's reconciliation committee was a private citizens' initiative. On the day, Eritrean and Ethiopian artists were to entertain the crowds and traditional foods would be shared between the people. The event was sponsored by Ethiopian business enterprises, including food suppliers and a local beer brewery. Their counterpart reconciliation committee in the Eritrean border town of Senafe had organised a delegation of 300 people to join in at the festivities in Zalambessa, and had received prior permission by the Eritrean force commander to cross over to the Ethiopian side. Early morning on 1 September the inhabitants of Zalambessa, in anticipation of the arriving Eritrean delegation, flocked to dismantle the Ethiopian defence line to clear the way for their Eritrean brothers and sisters. As time passed without any delegation appearing, and news spreading that they had been stopped

⁴⁸ Personal observations, Zalambessa, 27 November 2017.

⁴⁹ Interview with the commander (name withheld), 27 November 2017.

by the Eritrean military, two Ethiopian priests crossed the no man's land zone to clarify the matter with the Eritrean front line commander. There, they discovered that the former force commander and his unit had suddenly been removed, and a new force commander had been placed in charge. He excused himself to the Ethiopian priests saying that he had only been in that position for three days and had received no orders to allow Eritreans to pass into Zalambessa to participate in the reconciliation event.⁵⁰

It appears that the two governments in the capitals far from the borderlands would not allow their formal bilateral process to be overtaken by a grassroots-led reconciliation initiative aiming to soften the rigid inter-state border. The power to do so and to sanction 'reconciliation', was equal to the power to define 'enmity' and war, and was thus the prerogative of the political elites in the respective capitals.

The reconciliation event was conducted despite the absence of the formal Eritrean delegation. Many Eritreans living in Tigray, and a small delegation of Eritrean Afars crossing the border in the lowlands, still participated in the celebrations. At the event, the zonal administrator of Adigrat gave a moving speech addressing the shared history and community among the people of Eritrea and Ethiopia and pledging that the mistakes of the past should be rectified.⁵¹ He was optimistic that the border would be opened up for on-the-ground crossing after 11 September, the Ethiopian New Year. Less than two weeks later, just before going to Jeddah to sign the second peace agreement, President Isaias Afwerki and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed presided over the official opening of the border on the ground at Zalambessa, and the town was flooded by Eritreans who wanted to reconnect and reconcile with their Tigrayan counterparts.⁵²

A faltering peace process

A year and a half after signing the Eritrea–Ethiopia peace agreement – as this article was written – there appeared to have been no further formal institutionalisation of the peace rapprochement. No agreement formalising cross-border traffic, trade, tariffs, immigration, etc. had been ratified, nor had any information on the operations of the so-called High-level Committee, or its sub-committees mentioned in the peace agreement, been made known.

Newspaper reports indicate that a 'road-map' for peace was agreed upon as early as January 2019.⁵³ Simultaneously, rumours have circulated that an agreement had

⁵⁰ The information in this paragraph is derived from interviews with representatives of the Zalambessa reconciliation committee during fieldwork in Zalambessa, August/September 2019.

⁵¹ Personal observation, Zalambessa, 1 September 2018.

⁵² 'Ethiopia–Eritrea border reopens after 20 years', BBC, 11 September 2018, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45475876>>.

⁵³ 'Eritrea and Ethiopia roadmap for cooperation ready', *Borkena*, 29 January 2019, <<https://borkena.com/2019/01/29/eritrea-and-ethiopia-roadmap-for-cooperation-ready/>>.

been reached on a detailed framework regulating cross-border movement of people and goods, and that only President Isaias Afwerki's approval was pending.⁵⁴

On the issue of demilitarisation and border demarcation, no concrete movements have been made beyond some redeployment of troops away from the border zone. Ethiopian military forces still occupy territories granted to Eritrea by the EEBC, including the symbolic village of Badme and the more sensitive Irob area. No territories have been vacated and returned to Eritrea.⁵⁵

Likewise, Eritrea maintains full mobilisation and has not yet announced any plans to demobilise or to reform the open-ended national service obligation. Neither have any plans been announced for broader political and economic reforms, as for instance instituting the Eritrean Parliament, or implementing the suspended Eritrean Constitution. The country is still governed by Presidential Decrees.

The formal rapprochement initiated last summer has even taken a step back, with the unexpected unilateral decision by Asmara to close the border crossings for Ethiopians to enter Eritrea in late December 2018,⁵⁶ without any official explanation given by Eritrean (or Ethiopian) authorities as to why this was imposed.⁵⁷ Only the Oumhajir–Humera crossing remained partly open for traffic, until it was closed suddenly in late April 2019.⁵⁸

Subsequently, further restrictions were imposed on Eritreans wanting to cross the ground border into Ethiopia by apparently introducing a differentiated policy. The Eritrean border population is apparently allowed to cross back-and forth on foot with few obstacles.⁵⁹ Eritreans from Asmara and other inland towns, however, need to apply for permission from their local authorities to travel to Ethiopia. They must then obtain an exit visa from the immigration authorities in Asmara (presumably similar to an ordinary exit visa).⁶⁰ At the border, Eritrean authorities seem to have established an immigration facility where 'inland' Eritreans need to show their exit permit and register before being allowed to cross over to Zalambessa. People without permits are still crossing, but taking a one-hour detour around the formal check-point. If they are discovered by Eritrean border guards, they are reportedly just ordered to turn back without any further sanction.⁶¹ The active shoot-to-kill policy has thus seemingly been lifted.

⁵⁴ Interviews conducted with key EPRDF government and party officials in Mekelle and Addis Ababa in January and February 2019.

⁵⁵ 'Ethiopia not withdrawing troops from Eritrea frontlines yet', *Africanews*, 19 August 2018, <<https://www.africanews.com/2018/08/19/ethiopia-not-withdrawing-troops-from-eritrea-front-lines-yet/>>.

⁵⁶ The Ethiopian airline flights are still operating as normal, and Ethiopians are allowed to fly into Eritrea.

⁵⁷ AP, 'Eritrea closes border crossing to Ethiopian travellers', *news24*, 28 December 2018, <<https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/eritrea-closes-border-crossings-to-ethiopian-travelers-20181228-2>>.

⁵⁸ Based on information obtained by Tigrayan authorities in May 2019. See also, <<https://www.ezega.com/News/NewsDetails/7070/Eritrea-Closes-Omhajer-Humera-Border-Crossings>>.

⁵⁹ No vehicles are allowed to drive across the border, with the exception of the Oumhajir–Humera crossing where trucks with agricultural produce (and possible other goods) are reportedly allowed to cross intermittently. Transportation across no man's land on the Zalambessa and Rama crossings can be undertaken with horse-carts only. Personal observation.

⁶⁰ Interview with Eritreans in Mekelle having crossed illegally, April 2019.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Failure to institutionalise peace

Ethiopia announced in late May 2019 that two trade agreements had been submitted to Asmara for endorsement.⁶² One agreement regulated cross-border petty trade, and the other focused on bilateral trade. Interviews conducted in Addis Ababa with high-level government representatives during spring and summer 2019, however, suggested that these agreements, in addition to a port agreement regulating Ethiopian use of the Eritrean Red Sea ports, in reality had been finalised in early 2019, but were pending Eritrean input which had been constantly delayed.

Key Ethiopian officials admit off-the-record that ‘it takes two to tango’; they are frustrated and do not understand why President Isaias Afwerki does not appear to want to move forward and institutionalise the peace process. Even Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed alluded to this when he visited Axum in June 2019: in response to a question from the audience about when the border would be reopened, he admitted that the peace process had stalled. ‘It is not only up to us to open the border; there are two sides to the process’, he explained to an impatient crowd of Tigrayans.⁶³ According to Dr Abraha Negash, Vice President of Tigray, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed also alluded to President Isaias Afwerki’s unpredictability in moving the process forward; he believed he had secured an agreement with President Isaias Afwerki to reopen the Zalambessa border crossing in early May 2019, as the regional government in Tigray received a call from the prime minister’s office ‘to be ready’ in Zalambessa for cross-border traffic.⁶⁴ The regional government sent reinforcements of police and administrative personnel to the border, but nothing happened, and the border remains closed at the time of writing (November 2019). Despite the stand-still of institutionalisation of the peace process and the lack of response from Asmara, the Ethiopian government is preparing a peace dividend with Eritrea by furthering economic collaboration and integration, with policies aiming to establish joint economic activities along their long border and revamping the infrastructure between the two countries.⁶⁵

Inside Eritrea, however, there are few signs of similar activity. Allegedly, rapprochement with Ethiopia had been discussed at some meetings at different political and administrative levels after the signing of the peace agreement.⁶⁶ Some interpret this as a preparation for reforms. So far however, no public commitments or statements have been made to this effect. Indeed, in speeches made by President Isaias Afwerki on Liberation Day, 24 May and Martyrs’ Day, 20 June 2019, he neither commented on the peace agreements nor hinted at any forthcoming reforms. Rather, he has used the opportunity to tell the Eritrean people that this is a time to consolidate and take

⁶² ‘Ethiopia, Eritrea to sign trade accords’, *Ethiopian Herald*, 23 May 2019.

⁶³ Conveyed to the author by a person present in the audience.

⁶⁴ Interview with Dr Abraha Negash, Vice President of Tigray, Mekelle 24 May 2019.

⁶⁵ Interviews conducted with representatives from Prime Minister’s Office and several line ministries of the Ethiopian government in Addis Ababa, 26–30 May, 2019.

⁶⁶ Personal communication with international representative in Asmara). Other sources point to the opposite and suggest that President Isaias has taken this decision alone without informing his cabinet about the plan of implementation, <<https://africanarguments.org/2018/12/19/eritrea-senior-government-sources-reveal-nothing-isaias/>>.

stock of their development efforts, and continue their struggle for development as nothing has changed.⁶⁷ Likewise, two months after the Nobel Committee awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (in beginning of December 2019), neither President Isaias Afwerki nor any of his spokespeople had publicly commented upon the award or congratulated their ‘brother in peace’.

The absence of any institutionalisation of the peace declaration is obviously an increasing concern. Without this, considering the history of outbreak of war in 1998,⁶⁸ the unpredictability of the process is glaring. Currently, the ‘peace’ and ‘reconciliation’ content of the formal agreement are concepts held hostage by the political elites in both countries, without any border-population input or influence. Similarly, the resecuritisation of the border restricts its permeability and the possibility of advancing reconciliation and renegotiation of borderlands’ identities.

Consolidating peace and reconciliation bottom-up?

Notwithstanding the hobbled formal top-level negotiation process and the set-back of closing the border, informal people-to-people reconciliation continues. Border populations are reconnecting as individuals and families, neighbouring communities, and even as local government administrators, and security forces on both sides of the border. Eritreans in the borderlands cross back and forth every day, although in dwindling numbers, for petty trade, to buy necessities, to visit friends and family, or to participate in religious or social ceremonies.

Paradoxically, the peace rapprochement led to a huge surge in Eritrean refugees into Ethiopia, a trend which continued after the border crossing was closed. The opening of the border in September 2019 radically increased the flight of Eritrean refugees, as they no longer fear being shot by the Eritrean border patrols.⁶⁹ Numbers from the spring of 2019 given by local authorities in northern Ethiopia indicates that about 250 Eritreans cross every day and register as refugees.⁷⁰ In addition, a sizeable group cross over and settle in Tigray or elsewhere in Ethiopia without registering as refugees. Elsa (name altered) is a representative of this category. I met her in the border town of Zalambessa, where she stood in the doorway of her small guesthouse and restaurant. ‘All I want is to start a business and establish a future, without interference by the government’, she explained.⁷¹ Elsa left her mother and father behind in her hometown of Senafe after the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia opened for free crossing in mid-September 2018. Her small business in Zalambessa is capitalising on the renewed cross-border traffic, as the town experiences an economic up-turn as its peace dividend. When asked if she has

⁶⁷ ‘Eritrea: President Isaias Afwerki’s Speech on Martyrs Day 2019’, 20 June 2019, <<http://raimoq.com/eritrea-president-isaias-afwerkis-speech-on-martyrs-day-2019/>>.

⁶⁸ See Negash and Tronvoll on the background causes and triggering factors to the war.

⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch, *One Year After Peace Deal, Little Has Changed in Eritrea*, (2019), <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/09/one-year-after-peace-deal-little-has-changed-eritrea>>.

⁷⁰ K. Melicherova, ‘Exodus of Eritreans in Post-Peace Era Continues’, *UN Insider*, 9 May 2019, <https://www.indepthnews.net/index.php/the-world/africa/2673-exodus-of-eritreans-in-post-peace-era-continues#.XNZzsA_eveU.twitter>.

⁷¹ Interviewed 5 March 2019.

been back to Senafe, she looked puzzled and claimed: ‘Why? Whatever should I do in Senafe when the situation is as it is in Eritrea? I feel at home here in Zalambessa now’.⁷²

Local Tigrayan authorities in Zalambessa, as well as zonal authorities in Adigrat, confirmed that they communicate with their local government counterparts in Eritrea on issues of mutual concern. Likewise, both the front line force commander and security head in Zalambessa also stated that they talk regularly with their Eritrean counterparts, in order to ‘administer’ the fragile situation on the ground for the betterment of the border populations on both sides. It is doubtful, however, whether this localised cross-border communication between public entities is channelled through their respective capitals; this is a pragmatic approach adopted by state representatives on the ground, for various reasons and motivations. For instance, in lieu of a formal bilateral agreement regulating cross-border employment and business activities, in order to support themselves, the Tigray regional government has allowed all Eritreans to establish businesses without any licence and under temporary tax exemption.⁷³ This situation has arisen because the TPLF believes it is best for Eritrea’s future if as many Eritreans as possible stay in Tigray. This will enable a quick return after the situation changes in Asmara; they consider that the dire demographic haemorrhage of the Eritrean population will constitute the key challenge to rebuilding the country after a change of government.⁷⁴

Machinations and reconciliation: concluding remarks on the politics of peace

Complicating the consolidation of a sustainable people-to-people reconciliation process is the increasingly politicised and polarised context within Ethiopia, where the government party EPRDF is de facto split, rendering the federal government incapacitated and unable to implement policy in several regions, in particular Tigray.⁷⁵ As it seems clear that the peace rapprochement was entered into by President Isaias Afwerki due to TPLF’s loss of power in Addis Ababa, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has kept the TPLF in the dark regarding the formal bilateral process.⁷⁶ But, it is not Addis Ababa which controls the main border to Eritrea, but Mekelle. The tripartite elite power struggle between Asmara–Addis Ababa–Mekelle over defining the inter-state border and conditions on the ground, have thus a direct impact on grassroots people-to-people reconciliation.

This is made explicitly in relation to the return of the Eritrean territories of Badme and Irob. The local populations in these two areas have articulated fear and

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Interview with local administrators in Tigray, 5 March 2019.

⁷⁴ Interview with TPLF Executive Committee member, Mekelle, 6 March 2019.

⁷⁵ K. Tronvoll, ‘Putting Humpty Dumpty together again: the restoration of EPRDF’, *Addis Standard*, 26 March 2019: <<https://addisstandard.com/opinion-putting-humpty-dumpty-together-again-the-restoration-of-eprdf/>>; R. Lefort and W. Davidson, ‘Federalist Façade for centralist front’, *Ethiopia Insight*, 18 August 2019: <<https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/08/18/federalist-facade-for-centralist-front/>>.

⁷⁶ Interviews with key TPLF representatives, Mekelle, 3–6 March 2019.

insecurity in relation to the peace process and the possibility of displacement if their home areas are given to Eritrea (or ‘coerced’ to become Eritrean).⁷⁷ A particular concern is expressed by the Irob minority group, whose homeland is nestled up against the Eritrean border, a part of which is granted to Eritrea according to EEBC’s ruling. The local Irob administrator Nigussie Hagos explains:

The decision would pose a big threat to the survival of the Irob people. We are not against the peace deal. But peace should not come at the expense of losing sovereignty. We are 100 percent Ethiopians. If our peoples are divided between two countries, our very survival would be in question.⁷⁸

Abba Tuum, Irob’s Catholic parish priest, insisted that the only way to maintain peace in the Irob borderlands would be for any border-delineation process to include local elders from both sides of the border who would use customary mechanisms of reconciliation to settle the demarcation.⁷⁹ In this way, the EEBC decision, anchored in international law, would be translated to the ground through customary law, and would thus obtain local legitimacy and respect.

The temporary reopening of the border in September 2018 proved that the deep-rooted relationships between the people straddling the border are intact, even after twenty years of separation. It is thus doubtful that the renewed separation will recreate new enemy images. As the border peoples understand that the political conflict over the last two decades is an elite driven one, they are increasingly aware that, so too, is the formal politics of peace. It seems plausible that sustainable reconciliation in the Eritrean–Ethiopian borderlands would need to rely on grassroots-anchored processes, rather than politically motivated and irresolute formal peace declarations.

Notes on contributor

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⁷⁷ On Badme protests: AFP, ‘Residents protest peace deal on Ethiopia–Eritrea border’, *news24*, 12 June 2018: <<https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/residents-protest-peace-deal-on-ethiopia-eritrea-border-20180611>>.

⁷⁸ Quotation taken from A. Fantahun, ‘Irob Protest in Tigray Display Local Obstacles to Implementing Eritrea Peace Deal’, *Ethiopia Observer*, 11 June 2018: <<https://www.ethiopiaobserver.com/2018/06/11/irob-protests-in-tigray-display-local-obstacles-to-implementing-eritrea-peace-deal/>>.

⁷⁹ Interviewed in Mekelle, 3 April 2019.