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BOOK REVIEWS

Dereje Feyissa and Markus Virgil Hoehne (eds.) *Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa*. Suffolk, James Currey, 2010, pp. xv + 205 (hard cover), ISBN 9781847010186.

The topic of borders, borderlands and cross-border activities in Africa is both old and new. It is old in the sense that it dates back to pre-colonial (and colonial) periods of pastoralist seasonal migration and human population movement for purposes of trade and other social and cultural exchanges. This topic is new in that it continues to evolve, being shaped and mediated by the ever changing social, political and economic circumstances both within the African continent as well as globally. While there has always been a growing interest in this subject, the focus has largely been on borders and borderlands as inconvenient and unwarranted barriers to the free movement of people, goods and services. The common story in both academic and popular discourse is that African national borders are an artificial colonial invention that distort local people's identities by: (a) splitting ethnic/linguistic communities that otherwise belong together into two or more groups, forcing them into different nation-states; (b) lumping together distinct ethnic/linguistic groups into imagined homogenous communities forcing them to adopt a uniform national identity, and subsequently leading to (c) the emergence of multiple cross-border languages known by different and sometimes similar names across different national boundaries.¹ Much of the existing body of literature has further portrayed borders and their adjacent borderlands as sites of "ethnic conflict, political instability and criminal activity, giving an impression that the borderlands [are] at best a costly nuisance and at worse a serious threat to states..."²

Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa is a counter-narrative on the subject of borders and their intersection with cross-border activities in contemporary African societies. The book returns to the knotty questions on the role of the state and local community agency in the formation and legitimation of identities. It builds on and extends into

¹ Ndhlovu, Finex. "The Limitations of Language and Nationality as Prime markers of African Diaspora Identities in the State of Victoria." *African identities*. 7:1 (2009): 17-32

² Cassanelli, L. "The Opportunistic Economies of the Kenya-Somali Borderland in Historical Perspective," in D. Feyissa and M. V. Hohne (eds.) *Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa*. (Suffolk: James Currey, 2010): 133.

new directions the well-known contestations on border issues by highlighting the various ways by which communities on either side of national borders may build alliances with each other on the basis of shared linguistic, kinship and other cultural attributes to achieve positive outcomes for their livelihoods. With a specific focus on the Horn of Africa region, this edited volume tells the story of the agency of borderland communities and how they appropriate colonially inherited international boundaries to enhance economic, social, cultural and political opportunities. While acknowledging that borders in the Horn of Africa also put certain limitations on people's lives, this book is not so much interested in what the borders have done to the people. Rather, the focus of the book as outlined in the introductory chapter is on "what the people have done to the borders, and in what they have made out of living in borderlands as fields of opportunities."³ Based on the case studies of borders and borderlands of the Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, the book identifies four types of resources that can be extracted from cross-border activities:

- (a) Economic resources – in the form of cross-border trade and smuggling;
- (b) Political resources – including access to alternative centres of political power, trans-border political mobilization, sanctuary for rebels seeking to alter national structures of power, and strategic cooption of borderlanders by competing states;
- (c) Identity resources – the state border as a security device in an inter-ethnic competition, and legitimisation of the claim for statehood; and
- (d) Status and rights resources – including citizenship and refugee status, access to social services and related benefits tied to citizenship.

All the case studies discussed in the book address at least one of the above borderland opportunities, arguing that although they may exist on the margins in relation to the geographical extent of their respective nation-states, borderland communities are not always peripheral.

The book consists of eleven chapters. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives ranging from human geography to history, political science, social anthropology and cultural studies, the editors introduce the volume by providing a robust conceptual framework upon which subsequent

³ Feyissa, D. and Hoehne, M.V. "State Borders and Borderlands as Resources: An Analytical Framework." in D. Feyissa and M. V Hohne (eds.) *Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa*. (Suffolk: James Currey, 2010): 1.

chapters are predicated. Chapters two to ten are individual case studies exploring the convergences and divergences in local conceptions of boundaries, demonstrating that boundaries are not always known through international treaties, but are also created by local practice. The book concludes with chapter eleven, which ties together the theoretical and empirical issues explored in previous chapters. It reiterates the fluid nature of boundaries, noting that inasmuch as they are physical constructions, state borders also have cultural and social dimensions that enable borderland communities to enter into alliances with cross-border relations of shared kinship and linguistic attributes.

By challenging the dominant focus on state borders as constraints, and by providing an alternative view of them as sites for opportunities, this volume provides a significant and innovative contribution to the existing body of knowledge in the field. The case studies of borders and borderland activities indicate how crucial it is for there to be a re-ordering and reconstruction of identity conceptions in ways that take into account the everyday experiences and perspectives of borderland communities. This line of argument resonates with the continued increase in ‘informal’ cross-border activities and their contributions to national revenues in many African countries. For instance, the 2009 report of the Trade Committee of the OECD Trade and Agriculture Directorate indicates that ‘informal’ cross-border trade is “particularly significant for sub-Saharan African countries where trade taxes still represent a significant source of revenue for many countries.”⁴ Other studies have also reported that as of 2004, cross-border trade accounted for an average of about 25% of total tax revenue in sub-Saharan Africa.⁵ *Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa* is thus a timely contribution to the growing body of scholarly research in the field of trans-border issues in Africa.

However, there are a few points that the volume does not adequately address. First, some problematic concepts such as ‘kinship’ and ‘ethnicity’ are taken for granted. These concepts are used rather loosely

⁴ Lesser, C. and Moisé-Leeman, E. “Informal cross-border trade and trade facilitation reform in Sub-Saharan Africa.” *OECD trade policy working paper no. 86*. France: OECD Publication. 2009.

⁵ Walsh, J. T. “New customs.” In *France and Development*, 43(1), Washington, DC. 2006; and Mansour, M. “Revenue mobilization in Sub-Saharan Africa: Challenges from globalisation.” Paper presented at the USAID economic growth officers workshop. Washington, DC, 15 October 2007.

throughout the volume with none of the eleven chapters attempting to flesh out what exactly they entail. One would have expected to see a clearer definition of what these mean at least in the context of the Horn of Africa region. Secondly, the influence of external developments on issues of borders and borderlands in the Horn of Africa region has not been adequately addressed in the book. Although global political developments are mentioned in chapter eleven for instance, this has been done in passing. One would have expected to see a more detailed fleshing out of what the Horn of Africa case studies mean for cross-border activities, transnational identities and multilingual citizenships across the entire African continent. Furthermore, I would have wanted to see a concluding chapter that addresses the following important questions: Where do borderland issues in the Horn of Africa region sit within the ongoing political and intellectual debates around a united or federated Africa? How do issues described about the Horn of Africa region compare with what is happening in other parts of Africa, for example in Southern Africa or West Africa? How do changes in global politics and economics impact on borders, borderlands and cross-border activities? I think these questions were worth addressing in the concluding remarks, or at least they could have been signposted as areas needing further investigation.

The above concerns do not in any way diminish the outstanding contribution of this book to an empirically based and theoretically grounded understanding of borders and borderland issues. I recommend this book to anyone interested in learning more about the complexity of cross-border and identity issues in the Horn of Africa region. Although the book may appear to be targeted at specialist academic readership, it is written in a style that makes it easily accessible to the general non-specialist audience.

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Patrick Chabal. *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling*. Pietermaritzburg and London: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press and Zed Books, 2009, pp. xii + 212. ISBN: 978-1-84277-909-5.

Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling is the most recent contribution by King's College Professor Patrick Chabal. For almost thirty years, Chabal has been involved in key debates probing the causes of the African political crisis and the underdevelopment that seems to plague the continent. Two decades ago, he posed a double challenge, one that was based on the premise that no specific African politics existed, only politics in Africa. To "Africanists" he made the argument that searching for a specific "African" political culture as a starting point for explaining the state of the continent was a facile and potentially dangerous exercise. To those engaged in erecting "scientific" explanations and models, it was equally problematic to erase the history and culture of Africans altogether from examining the supposed failure of the projects of political and economic development undertaken by independent African states. As part of a wider movement, Chabal was articulating the shift underway in the social sciences towards a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of political actors and mechanisms in Africa, as well as elsewhere in the world. From this perspective, it is interesting to see how far Chabal has now moved from his earlier position, as well as the extent that he has overlooked the progress made in African studies in the last two decades. To this latter point first.

Chabal's tendency to caricature African studies today takes a little of the value away from what is otherwise a thought provoking read. On far too many occasions Chabal generalises in his assessment of what the Politics discipline does or not do when exploring politics in Africa. Chabal not only dismisses 'standard methodologies applied to African politics' because he believes that they '...have reached their limits- by which I mean they are no longer telling us anything new' (p. x) but he neglects the huge inroads made by scholars working with perspectives derived from critical cultural and postcolonial studies into questions of identity, agency, and colonial discourse.

If Chabal had made more effort to recognise the progress in African studies in recent times, he would have most likely positioned his study within a now fairly-well established tradition of scholarship that approaches politics in Africa as a complicated and multi-layered problematic using inter or multi-disciplinary perspectives. However, despite, the evident amnesia in this book towards the increasing amount of critically oriented studies of politics in Africa, Chabal's insights are worth engaging. In *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling*, Chabal states that he is most interested in shifting his focus from the arena of formal or high politics to that of the "everyday". The meaningful way Chabal is able to illustrate the human impact felt by Africans due to the decay of the public sector and the way that the erosion of politics has affected belonging and partaking, for example, is where the merit of the book lies.

The book is divided into three parts with the first dealing with the politics of being, the politics of belonging and the politics of believing. Section two focuses on the politics of partaking and striving while the third and final section attends to surviving and suffering. By focusing on the politics of the "everyday" Chabal portrays the existence in Africa of a vibrant and effective civil society and grassroots "activism" even when faced with 'calculated violence of neglect.' And, it is this point that brings me to the issue I raised earlier about Chabal's digression to what he once lamented was a tendency in the scholarship to focus on African cultural patterns and "webs of meaning." The observations that Chabal presents throughout his book tend to suggest that the reasons that there is an environment where political elites can and do practice extraversion and predation may be more effectively explained by interrogating the significant impact on national and local politics in Africa as a result of the changes wrought by contemporary global forces.

Unfortunately, he fails to make this connection and in doing inclines to well-worn accusations that the African crisis is solely of Africa's making and not part of a much-wider global impoverishment of political and value systems. Positioning African elite behaviour within a global paradigm dominated by privatisation and market-based rationales may reveal more about the causes of the African crisis than seeking out cultural patterns and webs of meaning.

What Chabal could have presented to his readers in this instructive essay is the importance of the core issues raised by political theory such as the role and history of the African state, legitimacy, national identity and so on as a basis for understanding the failure of the "development" project rather than putative impediments to growth and stability that derive from "African" political culture. In fact, it these core questions that should be at the forefront of thinking in coming to grips with the politics of suffering evident in societies all over the world as people struggle against inequity, alienation and atomisation in the contemporary global order. Sadly, Chabal doesn't endeavour to bring his most recent contribution full circle, that is, he fails to recognise that his analysis of the "everyday" is actually a further exhortation to place the contemporary Africa experiences that he uncovers within the context of the deeper universal questions about the future of politics. Despite these criticisms there is much to gain from the insights offered by this long-time scholar of Africa in his most recent book.

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Robert Maxon. *East Africa: An Introductory History*, 3rd edn. West Virginia University Press, 2009. ISBN 978-1-933202-46-4 (pb), 978-1-933202-83-9 (e-book).

Maxon's *East Africa* covers the history of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, with a concentration on their histories from the nineteenth century. The book is comparatively weak on East Africa before 1800 and, given the paucity of written materials available, is somewhat reliant on *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, a Greek merchant-sailor's guide written in the 1st century AD (!). Networks of production pre-1850 are touched on, with different aspects of the subsistence economy, yet there is little analysis of important sociological factors such as labour and gender. Social and political organisation is briefly touched upon. People

movements of the nineteenth century such as the Ngoni movements and the Swahili slave trade are also adverted to, yet there is little comment made on the far-reaching significance of these historical moments.

The colonial state and patterns of indirect rule, together with patterns of economic dependence (although the question of 'under-development' is not examined) are here documented. So too is the question of secondary resistance to colonial rule, in the shape of opposition to "alien" chiefs imperially imposed. There is also a good discussion of the colonial economy, of early 20th century reforms and cotton production in Uganda, for example. The Christianisation of certain parts of East Africa is reasonably well covered, with discussion of its integral roles in Buganda, for example. Mission activity elsewhere in the region is rightly noted as more contingent on the strength of the colonial state. The importance of Western, especially mission-based, education in forming the later elites of the three countries is discussed. The uneven coverage of Christian mission (and hence Western education) in Kenya is noted.

The achievement of independence for East Africa, and the decades following, is well covered. For example the Kenya of Jomo Kenyatta achieved economic growth and relative stability in the post-independence era; this is mentioned as partly due to Kenya's having maintained the closest ties with Britain. However the mention of peaceful [economic & land] transfers as an "outstanding achievement" with little further analysis rankled somewhat with this reader. This reader also found the discussion of economic advances and problems informative but would like to have seen more attention given to important issues of social history, including the nature of daily life for the majority.

One good conclusion of the book, albeit not couched in such terms, is that "the patterns established by 1914 would have a long and deep impact. The authoritarian colonial political system, the emerging Christian elites, the dependent economic systems, and the continuing missionary influence would mark the next period ... just as they did the initial one." Thus some good conclusions are reached but these are not as well developed as they could have been. As compendium of known facts this is an admirable volume, yet it is graced with little by way of analysis.

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