Political Geography 31 (2012) 205–214

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Political Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo

Agamben in the Ogaden: Violence and sovereignty in the Ethiopian–Somali frontier

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Keywords:
State of exception
Sovereignty
Frontier
Emergency powers
Giorgio Agamben
Ethiopia

A B S T R A C T

This paper asks what makes the periphery or the frontier a prime locus of the "inclusionary exclusion" that is, according to Giorgio Agamben, so constitutive of the state of exception. By applying Agamben's analytics to the Ogaden – a frontier province of the Ethiopian state – we propose an interpretation of the political history of the Ethiopian Ogaden as a recurrent government by exception that spans the Imperial rule (c. 1890–1974), the socialist dictatorship of the *Derg* (1974–1991), and the current revolutionary democratic regime led by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (1991–today). Drawing attention to the historical continuities in the exercise of (Ethiopian) state sovereignty in its (Somali) frontier, we offer a genealogy of the violent incorporation of the Ogaden into the Ethiopian body politic. We identify recurring practices of sovereign power by successive Ethiopian regimes that are constitutive of the state of exception, namely a conflation between law and lawlessness, the politics of bare life and an encampment strategy. By doing so, this paper insists on the constitutive importance of land appropriation – Carl Schmitt's *Landnahme* – in performances of sovereignty and territorialization at the margins of the postcolonial state.

Introduction

When asked about human rights abuses by Ethiopian troops in the country's volatile Somali or Ogaden region, Ethiopian prime minister Meles Zenawi responded: "The most stupid mistake a counter-insurgency operation can make is alienating the population. If you alienate the population, you're finished. We are not going to make that mistake" (Perry, 2007). As a leader of the former rebel Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that won the war against the *Derg* regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991, Meles Zenawi claimed that his government knew "how insurgencies succeed and how they fail". And yet, informed observers have described the Ethiopian National Defence Force's (ENDF) conduct as "antiquated" and markedly "counter-productive" as it motivated large parts of the local Ogaadeen population to join or support the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) (personal communication, Addis Ababa, 15 July 2008).

Moreover, as the above statement by the prime minister illustrates, the ruling EPRDF and its security strategists are aware of the counter-productive effects of indiscriminate counter-insurgency campaigns. The former TPLF rebels had fought a brutal war for self-determination during which they experienced firsthand how the heavy handed counter-insurgency tactics by the *Derg* soldiers strengthened popular support in their native Tigray region (Berhe, 2009; Tareke, 2002; Young, 1997). Despite this experience, Ethiopian army commanders applied very similar counter-insurgency tactics in 2007 and 2008 against the ONLF rebels and the Ogaadeen population (Alpeyrie, 2007; Gettleman, 2007a; Human Rights Watch, 2008). This begs the following question: Why did the Ethiopian army implement a counter-insurgency campaign in the Ogaden against its own better knowledge?

This paper sets out to answer this empirical puzzle by considering successive historical strategies to govern Ethiopia's Somali inhabited frontier that is commonly known as Ogaden. The protracted political instability in Ethiopia's Somali periphery has led some observers to conclude that "governmental institutions have never been strong" (van Brabant, 1994: 21), that the "regional government is weak and ineffective" (Devereux, 2006: 15) or that the "government has made no difference" (Lister, 2004: 23). Our argument is different: When considering the state of exception apparent in the centre's counter-insurgency activities as a manifestation of state sovereignty, one can no longer blame political turmoil in the Ethiopian periphery on the *absence* of the state. On the contrary, it is precisely at its periphery that a coercive Ethiopian

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doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2011.12.004

state has made its presence felt periodically and most resolutely among Somali society since the end of the 19th century and by doing so has integrated the periphery in its body politic.

"The notion of frontier," wrote Donald L. Donham (2002: 4) in the introduction to the classic *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia*, "(…) connects centre to periphery." While the Ethiopian imperial administration was quite successful in adapting to and engaging with local political structures in the western and southern frontiers of the country (James, 2002; Johnson, 2002), this was not the case for the south-eastern frontier, the Ogaden, where "the Ethiopian administration (…) failed rather dramatically to adapt to local religion and politics" (Donham, 2002: 46). While many of Ethiopia's pastoralist peripheries were only partially incorporated into the imperial and the *Derg* regime as their mobile life-style provided "insuperable obstacles" (Clapham, 2002: 22) to the socialist development policies of the *Derg*, the Ogaden remained particularly difficult to rule and control. Donham identifies reasons for this in the strategic location of the Ogaden as trade route, in the presence of Islam (as against Orthodox Christianity in the imperial highland civilization) and in the historical struggle between cultivators and pastoralists.

Writings on the political geographies of African states have often identified state failure or weakness, the inability to uphold a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence, as a key explanation for the occurrence of political violence (Bates, 2008; Rotberg, 2004). In *Political Topographies of the African State*, Catherine Boone (2003) explains the political economy of regional variations of political authority in settled agrarian societies in West Africa informed by a framework of institutional choice and bargaining. Jeffrey Herbst's States and Power in Africa (2000) argues that Africa's pre- and postcolonial rulers fought over labour rather than land (as opposed to European rulers). Hence they had no or little incentive to invest in bureaucracies, standing armies and engage in institution-building. Herbst's empirical material essentially reflects the Congo's or Central African experience, which is difficult to compare with Ethiopia. Ethiopia's state-building process since the 19th century was marked by centralization, increasing bureaucratization, a standing army and thus contradicts many of Herbst's somewhat sweeping generalizations about the African state.

Our study departs analytically from these institutionalist frameworks. Instead, it is informed by the growing literature on the geographies of sovereignty (e.g. Agnew, 2005; Elden, 2009; Sidaway, 2003). We concur with Achille Mbembe's warning that "the modalities through which a territory becomes the object of an appropriation or of the exercise of power or a jurisdiction" are extremely varied, leading to a "plurality of the forms of territoriality" in postcolonial Africa (Mbembe, 2000, 262ff.). For Mbembe, colonies and frontiers resemble each other as they are considered to be inhabited by "savages". Both are "zones […] where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of 'civilization' … the sovereign right to kill is not subject to any rule in the colonies" (Mbembe, 2003, 24). Mbembe alludes to the concept of (the state of) exception which has been brought to political geography by the writings of Giorgio Agamben and Carl Schmitt (Elden 2010; Legg, 2011; Meyer, Schetter, & Prinz, 2011). Claudio Minca (2006) has drawn geographers' attention to "the spatial architecture" of Agamben's theory of exception. Minca alerts us to the Agambian paradox that the sovereign is both inside and outside the juridical order (Minca, 2006, 85), producing veil effects of territorializing practices that result in a container thinking of state sovereignty, or in other words, the idea of unambiguous, unitary sovereignty that a state holds over a territory.

Agamben's theory of exception encompasses a relational as well as topological framing of sovereignty, territorialization and frontier, the latter being defined as "a fault line and … a contested zone … a zone of conflict and competition" (Reid, 2011, 22). Agamben's work has inspired numerous political geographers' writings on (counter-) insurgency, securitization, and illegal encampments of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib and Gaza (Aradau, 2007; Ek, 2006; Elden, 2009; Gregory, 2004, 2006; Korf, 2009; Minca, 2005). Other scholars have applied Agamben's analytics to study the politics of sovereignty in non-Western terrains, most prominently, Das and Poole (2004) and Hansen and Stepputat (2005), followed by sustained Doty's (2007) account of vigilante border guards along the U.S.-Mexican border, Fassin and Vasquez's (2005) study of the Venezuelan government's humanitarian response to a natural disaster, Korf's (2006) analysis of rogue discourses in the Sri Lankan conflict and Jones' (2009) account of the securitization of Indian–Bangladeshi border geographies. These studies have highlighted the multiple and fragile geographies of the state of exception beyond the paradigmatic spatial figure of the camp.

This paper scrutinizes the geographies of sovereignty that work through the state of exception in the Ethiopian–Somali frontier or Ogaden. Our main argument is that the "state of exception" in Ethiopia's Somali region is neither recent nor unprecedented, but part of recurrent interventions by which central highland rulers – from emperor Menelik to the socialist *Derg* to today's ethno-nationalist government led by Meles Zenawi – have been ruling the country's south-eastern frontier. The political violence that characterized these successive emergency measures must thus be seen as emanations of state sovereignty rather than as results of local disorder, state failure or anomy. As we shall illustrate in the following pages, the state of exception in the Ethiopian Ogaden represents a particular logic of government that is based on the normalization of exceptional strategies. Rereading the Ogaden's recent political history (ca. 1890–2009) in light of Agamben's theory of the state of exception allows us to unearth the intricate yet constitutive relations that exist between Ethiopia's political centre and its margins: the Somali periphery is not (only) a place where the Ethiopian state ends, but also one where disorder is internalized into the body of the Ethiopian sovereign through the state of exception.

The state of exception at the (Ethiopian) state frontier

What is the significance of the Somali frontier as a margin of the Ethiopian state? The Ethiopian highland elite and much of Ethiopian historiography (Clapham, 2002) perceive the Somali borderland as a largely empty space, devoid of civilization, waiting to become civilized by Orthodox Christianity and the Amharic language. It is considered as the periphery (*dar äger* in Amharic) at the border of Ethiopia's centre (*mehäl äger*). The importance of centre–periphery relations as well as moving centres and peripheries such as Harar, Jijiga or Dire Dawa in the evolution of the Ethiopian imperial state at the beginning of the 20th century has been documented by historian Cedric Barnes (2000). More recent research has highlighted how patron–client relations between federal government and party officials in the capital Addis Ababa and regional dignitaries in Jijiga have shaped politics in the Ogaden since 1991 (Hagmann, 2005; Samatar, 2004). But although the Ogaden appears to be at the geographic and political margins of the Ethiopian state, it has been central to the constitution of the Ethiopian state as a sovereign body. The recurrent violence and upheaval that we observe in the Somali periphery appears to be external to the order of the Ethiopian state, but became internalized into the rule of the Ethiopian state through the state of exception and related practices of emergency rule and counter-insurgency operations. This is so because the survival of the state hinges on its ability to tame and control its frontier, to exercise sovereignty.

The German constitutional lawyer Carl Schmitt famously wrote that "sovereign is he who proclaims the state of exception"