

War and the Politics of Identity in Ethiopia: the Making of Enemies & Allies in the Horn of Africa by Kjetil Tronvoll. New York, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2009. xiv + 239 pp. ISBN 978 1 84701 612 6.

In *War and the Politics of Identity in Ethiopia*, Kjetil Tronvoll takes on the delicate subject of identity and politics in the Eritrea-Ethiopian context. He painstakingly examines the diverse views and sometimes contradictory comments of the Tigrinya-speaking people of Tigray in explaining the latest war with their friendly-neighbor-turned-foe Eritrea. Tronvoll makes clear from the outset the scope of his study; this book, he states, is not “about the origin or the bilateral politics of the Eritrean-Ethiopia war. Neither does it address the effect of the war as seen from the Eritrean point of view, nor how it has impacted upon Eritrean identities” (p. 3). Also, the book does not discuss the regional and international aspect of the Eritrea-Ethiopia border war and the ensuing peace process. The book is instead about finding answers to basic questions on the effect of war on identity formation. The main questions are whether the bilateral war enhanced the ideology of nationalism, thereby creating a homogenous effect on the population at large, and, more importantly, whether the war helped to create a triumphant single-enemy image, solidifying the various close ethnic loyalties to a nationalist rhetoric. In trying to tackle these intricate and intertwined issues, Tronvoll focused on the two-year border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998-2000.

The primary sources that Tronvoll collected during the two-year period of active war and immediately afterwards, though useful, require a careful reading of the sentiments and aspirations of the people at the time of the interviews. This is important because those times were characterized by nationalistic ethos and government propaganda directed at the warring parties and the people of the two countries, who were highly polarized. Emotions were running high and very few on either side of the border were immune to the mainstream arguments of each country’s government’s accusation and dehumanization of the “other.” Those sentiments died out as time went by and people started to ask critical questions. Tronvoll starts off by giving a historical background to how the May 6, 1998 border incident led to a full-fledged border war between the two formerly friendly governments. The war continued on and off until the

June 2000 peace agreement, signed after the final and decisive military offensive by the Ethiopian defense forces penetrated well into the Eritrean territory.

The various groups and their respective responses to the border war that Tronvoll describes shed light on the complexity of identity formation in Ethiopia. For an outsider like Tronvoll, the seemingly contradictory notions of nationalism expressed by many informants make the findings interesting. Tronvoll has tasked himself with identifying the major ethnic groups and their allegiance to nationalism (Ethiopianess) in relation to their perception of the enemy's image (in this case, Eritrea). He focuses on the nationalistic agenda that has been manipulated by those in power. In the process of identity formation, territory/border define one's identity, and any violation of this is seen as "violation and desecration of a country's sovereignty and nationhood" (p. 12). Tronvoll gives a brief literature review on war, nationalism, ethnic loyalties, and the formation of identity. He argues that in times of war, those in the position of power invoke nationalist ideologies to rally people's support in the war effort.

Tronvoll further explores the various views on the Ethiopian state and its historical interpretation. The greater Ethiopian school of thought traces the Ethiopian state with over 2,000 years of history starting with the Axumite Kingdom in fourth century AD. This school of thought argues that the Ethiopian state expanded southward by assimilation of the surrounding people naturally. An alternative view is that the modern Ethiopian state is the construction of Emperor Menlik in the later part of the nineteenth century, when he conquered the southern, western, and eastern peoples of contemporary Ethiopia; this school of thought argues that the Ethiopian state was created through the colonial subjugation of other groups by the Amhara ruling class. Tronvoll, on the other hand, aligns himself with those scholars whose views are somewhere in the middle of these two views. This view recognizes the existence of the Ethiopian state as a historical fact, its Amharisation and oppressive characters.

Tronvoll argues that the claim for territory/land through wars defines one's identity within a group, while simultaneously defining the "other" outside of the group as the enemy. Although the focus of this book is on the 1998-2000 war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, Tronvoll traces its historical connection to the Battle of Adwa in 1896. The participation of Eritrean Askari alongside Italian colonial forces in the wars against

Ethiopia twice (the 1896 battle of Adwa and Italy's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia) created different identity for the highland people north and south of the Mereb River. This has to do, Tronvoll argues, with the way the Italians treated Eritreans as civilized (colonized by Italy since 1890) for their contribution in the war effort, and Ethiopians as uncivilized people, who had not undergone such a colonial civilizing mission. This created enmity between the people of the two countries.

Tronvoll argues that there had been shifting, overlapping, and sometimes contradicting alliances between the competing Eritrean and Tigrayan/Ethiopian fronts in the past. This was due to the pragmatic and opportunistic promises of support that were made between the various movements at the time. The author further argues that the two fronts had “an unstable and shifting alliance” due to differences in political ideology, development policy, and competition for hegemony (p. 51). Tronvoll emphasizes the fact that many Tigrayans viewed the war with Eritrea as a conflict between brothers (from “one and the same country”) and that the war was sparked because Eritreans wanted to position themselves above Tigray/Ethiopia. In addition, the “war was not only politico-culturally inspired, but also involved a struggle over land” (p. 67).

Tronvoll's elaborate discussion of the relationship between the Tigrinya-speaking communities of Eritrea and Ethiopia provides a deeper understanding of the relation and competition among members of the same ethnic group. The concepts of *habbo/ma'anta* (courage and resilience) and *henay mifdai* (to obtain revenge) are elaborated with examples of the Tigrayans' bravery in defending their territories against the enemy—*shabiya* (common name for the Eritrean ruling party). The 1998 border conflict resulted in the redefinition of the Eritrea-Ethiopia relationship from friends to enemies and the shift in definition from ethnic federalism to Ethiopian nationalistic discourse. Leaders of the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) portrayed the threat from Eritrea as a threat to Ethiopian sovereignty and advocated that Ethiopians of all ethnic backgrounds defend their country from the common enemy of Eritrean leadership. Tronvoll also emphasizes that there was some ambiguity in trying to distinguish between the Eritrean leadership as the enemy and the Eritrean people as the friend.

Tronvoll uses the symbolic expression of nationalism to analyze the changing discourse of Ethiopian identity formation. He discusses how the link between the Adwa

victory over the Italians one hundred years earlier was made with the latest victory of the Ethiopian Defense Forces in Badme through slogans such as “The victory of Adwa was repeated at Badme!” and “The victory scored by our fathers was repeated by our children!” and “The youth have lived up to the historical legacy through a resounding victory!” (p. 140).

The numerous interviews Tronvoll collected for the book show the masses in Ethiopia expressing revenge and hostility towards Eritrean leadership. This hostility has been coupled with temporary and fragile allegiance to the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government by the various political groups and people of differing political conviction in Ethiopia against the common enemy—Eritrea. The opposition political parties in Ethiopia supported the war with Eritrea for reasons that were different from those of the ruling party. The EPRDF claimed that the popular support for the war with Eritrea was due to the successful development policies and political liberalization pursued by the government. On the contrary, one prominent opposition figure argues that much of the support for the war could be found in reasons of retaliation (*henay mifdai*).

The border war between the two countries aroused multi-faced Ethiopian nationalism. The EPRDF, which had played down the notion of Ethiopian nationalism in favor of ethnic federalism in the years prior to the border conflict, resorted to nationalistic rhetoric to rally support in the war against the common enemy, Eritrea, in 1998-2000. Tronvoll argues that for many Ethiopians, the EPRDF government was still an enemy that had captured the state power. However, it was secondary compared to Eritrea’s threat.

Tronvoll has identified many core issues that are complex and intricate in the Ethiopian identity formation discourse, and *War and the Politics of Identity in Ethiopia* is a great contribution to understanding how identities are formed in times of war. At the same time, continual shifts in alliance-building prove that yesterday’s enemies can be friends today and vice versa. This book is a good summary of the complex identities and ethnicities in Ethiopia.

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