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Continuity and Rupture in Ethiopia under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

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"Things Change, but the Situation is Always the Same". Continuities and Ruptures in the Border between Ethiopia and Eritrea

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Abstract

In the last decades, the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea has been characterized by deep transformations, which have changed the local regimes of mobility and reshaped the symbolic boundaries between Eritrea, Ethiopia and the Northern Ethiopian region of Tigray. Drawing from ethnographic research conducted in Mekelle, the main town of Tigray, this article aims at exploring the repercussions that some "critical events" (Das 1997) related to that border (Eritrean independence in 1993, the 1998-2000 Eritrean-Ethiopian war, and the 2018 peace agreements) have provoked in the biographical trajectories of those people who crossed it from 1991 onwards, namely the Ethiopian returnees and Eritrean refugees. While these historical watersheds have brought about critical changes for the people and the communities involved, such as economic failures, forced mobility, an increase in feelings of insecurity and the reshaping of feelings of belonging, the ethnographic data highlights a number of elements that endured in time and in space. By combining the study of the event with a focus on space, and by focusing on the narratives and everyday lives of ordinary people, this article intends to contribute to current debates in the social sciences and Horn of Africa studies both on social changes and on political and symbolic borders.

Keywords: event, border, forced migration, social change, Ethiopia, Eritrea

Introduction

When I first arrived in Mekelle, the main town of the northern Ethiopian region of Tigray, at the end of 2007, the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) was still in operation. Established on 31st July 2000 as part of the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea, amongst the Mission's mandates were monitoring the end of the fighting that had erupted in June 1998 between the two countries and the completion of the process of the demarcation of their shared border. Although the UNMEE's main field of activity was not in Mekelle, the recurring military convoys passing through the town and the occasional noise of warplanes in the sky revealed the closeness (in time) of the violent clashes and the proximity (in space) of a disputed border. However, I was not fully aware of this proximity and closeness until I decided to focus my doctoral research on migratory movements from Eritrea to Ethiopia that occurred after the watershed events of Eritrean independence in 1993 and the Eritrean-Ethiopian war in 1998-2000. When I went back to Mekelle in 2013, the UNMEE was no longer operating, having interrupted its activity in July 2008,[1] but the border was closed, as it would remain until the peace agreements signed by the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the Eritrean President Isayas Afewerki in 2018.

In this article I do not intend to retrace the intense and polarized debate about the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea and its history. Rather, I am interested in exploring the experiences of those people who crossed it in a specific period of time (1991-2019), moving from Eritrea to Tigray. By using a biographical approach to my long-term ethnography, my aim is to contribute to the reflection about the processes of transformation in Ethiopia at the core of this issue of *afriche e orienti* from an anthropological perspective, in the light of the continuities and ruptures that some "critical events" (Das 1997) related to the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia have provoked in the lives of the people and communities who were deeply embedded in them.

Combining reflections on the concept of the "event" with the study of a border means connecting a historically sensitive approach with a focus on space: while an event is a break in the flow of time, a border implies discontinuities on multiple levels, including at a geographical level. Moreover, looking at the critical events of a border suggests going beyond so-called methodological nationalism (Wimmer, Glick Schiller 2002) to consider the effects of an occurrence on both sides of a frontier. Likewise, in this article I take into account not only the experiences of the nearly 180,000 Eritrean citizens (UNHCR 2021) who, in the last two decades, due to the repressive drift of the government of Isayas Afewerki, have been accepted by Ethiopia as refugees, but also of the thousands of Ethiopian citizens living in Eritrea who "returned" to Ethiopia during the 1990s and the 2000s. Despite their different legal status, these border crossers share a similar migratory trajectory and have been involved in the events under consideration.

However, both the journey and the events have different meanings for them.
The critical events which I take into account are: Eritrean independence, which was achieved in 1993 (*de facto* 1991) after a thirty-year war against Ethiopia won by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), and which turned a regional borderline into a border between two states; the 1998-2000 war, which resulted in the closure of that border; and the above-mentioned peace agreements of 2018. These events have dramatically changed the local regimes of mobility, introducing new legal statuses (e.g., Eritrean refugees and Ethiopian returnees), defining the possibilities, methods and routes of border crossing, and influencing the daily life of people moving from Eritrea to Ethiopia. They have also reshaped the symbolic boundaries between Eritrea, Ethiopia and Tigray, which has had consequences on people's social and family ties and feelings of national belonging. Moreover, the independence of Eritrea and the recent peace agreements mark the beginning and end of the political hegemony of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which was the political party that ruled the country for almost two decades (1991-2019), under the leadership of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the movement that had led the liberation war (1975-1991) against the authoritarian government of the Derg (1974-1991).
Although the selection of these events may seem obvious to the reader who knows local history, as social scientists we should not forget that events are not natural phenomena. The basic definition of an event is "something that happens"; yet what differentiates one moment from another or makes a certain occurrence remarkable are the social processes through which a fact acquires a specific meaning, that is, through which it becomes an "event" (Alexander 2003). From this perspective, the three events I selected are both "socially meaningful" for my research participants, and "meaningful to the social" (Hoffmann, Lubkemann 2005), in the sense that they are able to speak to larger social issues. On the one hand, I intend to explore these caesuras by shedding light on how they have changed the lives of ordinary people by bringing about economic failures, forced mobility and marginalization, shattering family and neighborhood relationships, and reshaping experiences of home and modernity. On the other hand, I try to show how the repercussions of these events went beyond the moment in which they occurred as they penetrated the biographies, social experiences, fantasies, and the moral and interpretative frames through which people navigate their daily life in the here and now.
This article is based on an ethnography I conducted in 2013-2014, two follow-up visits in 2016 and 2019, and ongoing conversations with some of my research participants through social media and telephone. The empirical data I collected is composed of in-depth interviews and informal conversations, as well as home visits, go-along talks and participation in celebrations and everyday activities. Here I particularly take into account the life stories of Henok,[2] an Ethiopian returnee, and Solomon, an Eritrean refugee, two young men born in Asmara who moved to Mekelle in the 2000s. The two

men share an urban background and are both Tigrinya-speakers, a linguistic group that predominantly inhabits the central Eritrean plateau and the adjacent Northern Ethiopian region of Tigray.[3] Both stories show some of the consequences of the above-mentioned critical events, and the ways in which the two men have differently experienced and codified them in the light of their political stances and affective backgrounds. The first case illustrates how Henok's experiences and uses of "modernity" – herein understood as a discourse about oneself and others – have changed following his spatial movements and the events under investigation. The second case explores how the 1998-2000 war has influenced Solomon's daily life in Mekelle, becoming a lens for interpreting his present conditions and elaborating his desires for the future. Before focusing on Henok's and Solomon's life stories, however, it is important to clarify how I conceptualize the notions of event and border and to give some background information.

Looking at events and borders

The study of events has long been part of the anthropological toolbox; nonetheless the relationship of anthropology with "continuities" and "fractures" has been intricate. While disciplines such as history and sociology have principally focused on moments of shifts in social processes, for decades anthropology was interested in structural continuities and their social reproduction, devoting its attention to those considered "people without history" (Fabian 1983). Struggle and conflict began to receive systematic consideration only in the 1950s, when scholars from the Manchester School and the related Rhodes Livingstone Institute of Lusaka opened up to the analysis of social change and situated practices. However, despite their methodological worth, events were mainly considered by Gluckman (1940) and his colleagues for their contributions to the equilibrium and production of the social realities within which they irrupted (Kapferer 2010). Even in the following decades, when changes and processes became central to anthropological interest, widespread styles of ethnographic representation continued to analyse events in so far as they were supposed to allow ethnographers to disclose hidden social patterns or to capture the meaning of social life. Thus, the tension between events and processes, ruptures and permanence has characterized the history of the discipline, interlacing with "the never-ending debate about the continuity and reproduction of society" (Berliner 2005: 203).

Recently, the analysis of the nexus between events and transformations has received renewed attention. For example, in her book on collective violence in India, Veena Das (1997) insists on the value of "critical events", which are those events that are able to modify people's conception of the world, to redefine pre-existing moral and symbolic frames, and to inspire new modes of action. Das argues that the partition of India in 1947 and the Bhopal disaster in 1984 introduced new actors and logics, thus provoking a break in history from which there was no going back. In a more recent article, Bruce

Kapferer (2010) uses the work of Deleuze and Guattari to argue that the reason to analyse events is not to explore a closed and static system, but to look at the "potentiality of a becoming that is always not yet" (*ivi*: 16). The emphasis on cultural creativity is also part of Danny Hoffmann and Stephen Lubkemann's (2005) conceptualization of events in their studies on the Mano river region in Western Africa, a context where violence and crises are parts of social life. Where unpredictability and uncertainty have become an everyday reality, and life is so "event-full" (*ivi*: 318) that social actors have to develop new abilities to navigate it (cf. Utas 2005), continuity and transformation, change and stability appear as deeply interlaced. From this vantage point, the authors suggest a broader approach to events that aims at combining those conceptualizations that highlight ruptures and those that stress continuities and connections.

A similar imbrication of fractures and continuities characterizes the critical events on which I focus in this article. Although Eritrean independence, the 1998-2000 war between Ethiopia and Eritrea and the peace agreements can be considered as watersheds in the recent history of the border, they call into question long-lasting dynamics, thus suggesting the need to look beyond the timeframe in which they took place. As is well known, the borderline was drawn during Italian colonialism (Guazzini 1999), partitioning an area that the Ethiopian rulers considered part of their domain, and whose inhabitants were bound together by political and economic relationships, linguistic and cultural similarities and family and social ties. However, since its demarcation, the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea has never been erased. As elsewhere in Africa (Nugent 2002; Brambilla 2009), although imposed on local communities by foreign political leaderships (the Ethiopian empire and Italian colonialists),[4] this border became part of the lives and the imagination of those who experienced it and moved across it. Indeed, just like events, borders are "created" and "creative" settings, which, beside their physical dimension, convey symbolic, cultural, historical and religious meanings, and can open up resources as well as constraints (Asiwaju, Nugent 1996; Dereje, Hoehne 2010). Borders are embodied by people and groups in many ways, such as in the bureaucratic and political systems that distinguish between citizens and foreigners and establish rights and duties (Donnan, Wilson 1999). Bureaucracies and regulations also contribute to the construction of mobility regimes (e.g., visa systems, border patrols, and legal status for people on the move) that establish the possibility of crossing borders for different categories of people (Glick Schiller, Salazar 2013). Moreover, drawing borders means activating processes of "othering" that distinguish the Us-group from the Others through the construction of narratives and feelings of national belonging and social boundaries that foster practices of distinction and identification (Barth 1969; Van Houtum, Van Naerssen 2002).

A contested borderland

After colonialism had ended, the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea had several

institutional functions, which reflected different views and political projects regarding the relationships between the two countries. The British Military Administration of Eritrea (1941-1952), the federation of Eritrea to Ethiopia (1952-1962), the forced annexation in 1962 of Eritrea by the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, Eritrean unionist and separatist movements and "Greater Tigray" projects (Calchi Novati 1994), all represent different incarnations of the swing between continuities and discontinuities, and between similarities and divergences across the border. This tension also characterized the academic debates on the subject, in which, as Richard Reid writes (2007: 239), the EPLF and TPLF's tense and intense relationships, the colonial period, and even the pre-colonial era were used "either to demonstrate Ethiopia's legitimate historical control of much of what is now Eritrea, or to refute this older, more "traditional", perception and to prove that Eritrea was at no time an integral part of a "greater Ethiopian/Abyssinian empire". Both readings capture only part of the historical relations between the Ethiopian kingdoms and the current Eritrean central highlands, which were characterized by commercial relations and conflicts, proximity and distances, and domination and autonomy (Smidt 2012). Furthermore, in the last century the relationships between the Tigrinya-speaking communities on both the Eritrean and the Ethiopian sides of the border have been characterized by the constant fluctuation of alliances and enmities following historical and political contingencies. This influenced the ways in which Tigrayan and Eritrean communities alternatively represented each other as foes or friends, while always recognizing their intimate connections (Tronvoll 2009).

The emphasis on separation has been promoted by the Eritrean independent movements, including the EPLF that has identified Italian colonialism and Ethiopian oppression as the cornerstones on which its own "synthetic" and homogenizing version of nationalism is based (Bernal 2004; Hepner 2009; Bozzini 2011). After the defeat of the Derg, the distance between the two countries was institutionalized with Eritrean independence, and power was seized by the Fronts that led the war of liberation, namely, in Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi's EPRDF and, in Eritrea, Isayas Afewerki's People's Front for Democracy and Justice (the PFDJ, the successor to the EPLF). However, due to the historical, economic and cultural ties between the two countries, the presence of Ethiopian and Eritrean citizens on both sides of the border, and some unsolved issues related to citizenship and sovereignty, the border remained porous and the rhetoric of relatedness and alliance was widespread both in official statements and popular expressions (Iyob 2000; Negash, Tronvoll 2000; Tronvoll 2009).

The border was then strengthened with the 1998-2000 war, which can be considered to be part of the process of Eritrean nation-state building (Guazzini 2021; Tronvoll 1999). This conflict reinforced the separation between Ethiopia and Eritrea not only because for the following two decades it kept the border closed and practically impermeable, but also because it had deep and durable impacts on the symbolic boundaries between

the two countries. The violence, the government propaganda and the messages shared on the internet and other media by members of the Ethiopian and Eritrean diaspora (Sorenson, Matsuoka 2001; Triulzi 2002) crystallized the distance between the two countries and turned the language of friendship and alliance into a rhetoric of hostility and enmity without erasing the reciprocal language of siblinghood (Tronvoll 2009).
As the next sections will show, this event had a deep impact on people living on both sides of the border, and, due to their multiple ties, was particularly relevant among Tigrinya speakers in Ethiopia and Eritrea (Costantini, Massa 2016; Massa 2017). By taking into consideration these ties and people's biographies the border appears to be simultaneously porous and impermeable. For example, the refugees and returnees who took part in my research shared a bond with Asmara and with the positive symbolic imaginary linked to the city, shared the experience of forced migration and, in some cases, had relatives on both sides of the border. Yet their different legal statuses and the role of nationalism constructed them as different groups. I thus consider the analysis of people's everyday practices and narratives to be best suited for observing the interplay of the continuities and discontinuities behind these events. As Das (2006: 7) writes, there is a mutual absorption of the event and the ordinary "as if there were tentacles that reach out from the everyday and anchor the event to it in some specific ways". In other words, it is in the realm of ordinary life and in the narratives which frame an "event" that its effects can best be grasped.

Henok: fractures in time and space

When we met in 2013, Henok was 33 years old and owned a successful tailor shop in Mekelle. The shop was the setting in which most of our meetings took place and where, while sewing dresses, he wove the thread of his biographical trajectory. Henok was born in Asmara, to which his father Mebrahtu had moved as a teenager in the 1970s, in search of better living conditions than he'd had living in his village in Tigray.[5] Although Mebrahtu had arrived in Eritrea without money or work skills, in a few years he was able to improve his status to the point of opening a knitwear factory that, by the 1990s, had "more than 40 machines", as Henok proudly repeated to me. When discussing his life in Asmara, Henok talked about his best friends, his passion for cycling (the Eritrean national sport), and the festival his family celebrated with their neighbors. In this atmosphere, the independence of Eritrea was for him far from "critical", but was rather an event that he celebrated with his friends. He commented: "At that time, I did not know I was Ethiopian, I did not know what that meant". This sentence, "I did not know I was Ethiopian", was one I heard frequently from the children of those who had migrated from Tigray to Eritrea, through which they marked the discontinuities introduced by the 1998 events.
Indeed, Henok's family life was shattered by the outbreak of the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, whose effects resonated far beyond the border and penetrated the lives of

those who found themselves on the "wrong side" of it. Both Ethiopian citizens residing in Eritrea and Eritrean citizens residing in Ethiopia suddenly became "enemies" and the victims of deportations, discriminations and other forms of violence. Targeting those who, by their very presence, contradicted the image of two distinct national communities, these actions can be interpreted as an attempt to purify the nation and reinforce its external social boundaries (cf. Appadurai 2006). In Henok's words, the two years of open warfare turned out to be a frightful and painful period. He told me about his younger siblings who were called "*agame*" at school, a derogative term referring to a stereotypical image of poor, backward and dirty workers from the countryside. While Agame is the name of an area of Tigray, its use as an insult dates back to colonial times (Locatelli 2009; Bereketeab 2010), covering a semantic area which the "clean" and "modern" Asmara historically emphasized its difference from. During the war, *agame* was a painful label, because it "constructed" a difference between Tigrayans living in Eritrea and Eritrean citizens. Henok told me his father was arrested, for reasons that he was not able to explain to me. And he also told me that he himself was so horrified by the rumours circulating of Ethiopian citizens being killed on the street by civilians that he used to sleep wearing clothes and shoes to be ready to escape in case someone would attack their house. Whether true or not, these stories amplified the effects of the violence he and other people suffered, shaping a shared and enduring atmosphere of terror (cf. Taussig 1995). Although not all the returnees I interviewed emphasized the dark sides of the war, stories about discrimination at school and arrests or attacks were quite recurrent, and can be understood as the result of a collective process which discursively turned the circumstances of the war into an "event".

These experiences did not break Henok's emotional bonds with Asmara. However, together with the institutional limitations imposed on Ethiopian citizens, they made it impossible for him to continue his previous life. In 2003 Henok's family decided to move to Tigray, a place he had never been to and that had not meant much to him. At that time, the repatriation of Ethiopian citizens was guaranteed by the humanitarian corridors opened by the International Committee of the Red Cross across the closed border, and was permitted after obtaining clearances from several Eritrean institutions. Henok and his family travelled by bus, taking with them nothing more than some personal belongings and a few hundred dollars sewn into the hem of their clothes, and leaving behind their 40 machines, the life they had chosen and built, and the only "home" Henok had hitherto known. As in the accounts of many other research participants, hope and sadness were intertwined in Henok's memories, giving multiple meanings to his journey to Ethiopia.

After a few weeks in a reception camp, Henok and his family moved to Mekelle where he felt like a fish out of water. He pointed out that their lifestyle changed and there were small but significant differences which made his relationships with the locals and the city difficult. These differences were often expressed by Henok through the language

of "modernity" and "civilization", interlacing spatial mobility with a progressive conceptualization of time. These differences included ways of speaking Tigrinya as well as certain positive attributes (food tastes, cleaning habits, open-mindedness, frankness and so on) that those who come from Asmara, the so-called *deki Asmara* (literally "sons of Asmara"), attributed to themselves to draw a symbolic boundary with the *deki Mekelle*. He told me: "The first day here, my siblings and I spent hours looking for a *macchiato*: in any café we visited we only got a glass of milk and a glass of coffee". Like other people I met, he mentioned the cold welcome they received from the local population - who sometimes accused the returnees of being too close to Eritrea - as well as the poor economic support provided by Ethiopian institutions (Massa 2021). Only when Henok received money from some of his relatives living abroad could he open a tailor shop to follow in the footsteps of his father and his famous knitwear factory in Asmara.

Henok was particularly proud of his success as an entrepreneur, and, following a widespread narrative, he attributed this to his Eritrean background. This was clarified one day in February 2014, when I was in the back of the shop with him and another returnee and we were discussing the effects that their arrival had had on Mekelle. "You know", the other man told me, "We *deki Asmara* are hard-workers and have skills that people from here did not have before we came. As soon as we arrived, we started working as carpenters, electricians, cooks, tailors... and we changed Mekelle". Henok added: "Until 20 years ago, Mekelle was little more than a village. When people from Eritrea arrived, things began to change, businesses were started, houses were built better... Before there was nothing, no clothes or shoe factory... Not even a *macchiato*", he concluded, referring to our previous conversation.

Like many other returnees, by emphasizing the "modernity" that he felt he embodied and that in his first years in Mekelle was the uncomfortable marker of his "diversity" as a migrant from Eritrea, Henok claimed to have contributed to the dramatic urban and economic development that had characterized the city in recent years. Talking about the urban and economic transformations of Mekelle was for him also a metaphorical register through which he described his personal changes in relation to the town. Indeed, these transformations reverberated with the ways in which he had reshaped his sense of self as a Tigrayan, an Ethiopian and as a *wedi* (son) *Asmara*, partially reversing the *agame* label. This interlacement also helped him to build his sense of home in Mekelle, turning it into a significant place for him. In other words, by playing with well-established markers of the border between Mekelle and Asmara, and between Tigray and Eritrea, Henok and other returnees managed to bridge the break - between their past and present life, between here and there, between Asmara and Mekelle – that was provoked by the war and their subsequent repatriation.

This is more evident when we read Henok's stress on "modernity" and "hard work" in the light of the development programs and narratives introduced by the EPRDF in

the 2000s (Hagmann, Abbink 2011; Vaughan 2011). Although they were accompanied by authoritarian and coercive modes of governance (Lefort 2012; Di Nunzio 2019), these narratives were able to penetrate people's subjectivities and instilled the idea of a circular relationship between individual responsibility and collective development (Villanucci 2014). In line with these political narratives, many returnees related their ability to change and improve Mekelle with the transformation and enhancement of their personal situation. In this way they set the basis for their social inclusion and personal redemption, and for building a bond with their new town and country.

When I returned to Mekelle in November 2019, this shift had become even more evident. "As soon as the border is reopened, I will be the first to cross it", was a sentence I had heard so many times during my previous fieldwork that I was not surprised to discover that almost all returnees I had met had gone to visit Eritrea when the border was reopened. However, my interlocutors" emotional tone about that journey, including Henok's, was different from what I had expected. They depicted Asmara and other Eritrean towns as old and abandoned places, a far cry from the lively centers that they had remembered and, above all, from the economic boom that had changed Mekelle. Here again, the journey across the border appeared as a sort of time travel both through their own personal stories and along a line of progress in which Asmara appeared as disconnected from those global flows that had hit Mekelle as a result of EPRDF policies. In the accounts of their journeys, the symbolic relations between Asmara and Mekelle did not disappear, but were rather overturned: in 2019 progress, development and modernity were used to connote Mekelle rather than Asmara, showing how, despite this partial reversal, this marker continued to be particularly relevant. Moreover, as their "return" to places now irremediably lost, these journeys also acted as a further step in their emotional and symbolic attachment to Mekelle. In fact, in their own words the sadness, disappointment and frustration for Eritrea had been reabsorbed into the pride of being *Tegaru* (Tigrayans), which, for some years, had become stronger in the city and the wider region.

Solomon: hoping for a change

Solomon was born in 1989 and was too young to remember when Eritrea became independent. However, he represented this event as a turning point in his life and in the history of his country. He was imbued with nationalistic rhetoric and feelings, which he absorbed through official discourses, public celebrations and school programs (Woldemikael 2008; Riggan 2016), as well as his family environment. Several of his close relatives had been *tegadelti*, guerrilla fighters during the liberation war against Ethiopia, and, thanks to their accounts, he knew many stories about the war as well as the atmosphere of the post-liberation years. At the beginning of 2013, when I met him in Mekelle where he lived as a refugee, his strong nationalist feelings coexisted with his firm opposition to the repressive drift of the current Eritrean government.

His memories were more personal when they referred to the second critical event at the center of this article, namely the 1998-2000 war. Solomon told me how proud he was of his father who, according to what he understood as a child, went to the front "to kill as many *agame* as he could". He told me about the anti-Ethiopian song he used to sing and quarrels that they had with their Ethiopian neighbors. But he also recalled the support he gave to his best friend, an Ethiopian citizen, when the latter was attacked by their schoolmates. Besides these occurrences, Solomon saw the war as the culmination of a longer history of oppression suffered by the Eritrean people, which dated back to the empire of Haile Selassie and the regime of the Derg, and which could be repeated in the future. In line with Eritrean government propaganda, especially before his departure, Solomon imagined Ethiopia as an aggressive enemy that could never be trusted.

The outcomes of the war also marked the years Solomon spent in Ethiopia. He left Eritrea in 2010 due to the repressive system that the Eritrean government had imposed on its citizens since the early 2000s, and to escape national service that forces young people to serve the government for an indefinite period of time. In order to avoid being caught, imprisoned or killed by the Eritrean military police and border patrols who try to prevent people from leaving the country, he crossed the border irregularly with the help of a smuggler, by foot and at night (Belloni 2019; Massa 2019). Once in Ethiopia, Solomon was granted refugee status in the identification center in the town of Endabaguna and then assigned to one of the four refugee camps in Tigray. According to the Refugee Proclamation of 2004, refugees had to reside in the place they were assigned by the Administration for Refugee Returnee Affairs (ARRA), and, with some exceptions, these were camps. Solomon lived in the camp for nearly a year, suffering from difficult living conditions, the boredom of having nothing to do and a lack of future prospects. Although his initial plan was to stay in Ethiopia for a short time and then continue his journey towards what he considered to be better destinations (e.g., Europe and the United States), due to the obstacles to mobility he remained "stuck in transit" (Brekke, Brochmann 2015; Massa 2021). His life in Ethiopia started to improve when, thanks to the out-of-camp policy introduced by the Ethiopian government in 2010, he was admitted to Mekelle University as a student in the accounting department. Solomon was positively surprised by the welcome he received after arriving in Ethiopia, and this feeling increased when he moved to Mekelle. One morning in June 2013, sitting in a cafe in his campus where we often had breakfast together, he told me: "I am wondering why they are treating us like this. I mean they suffered a lot! For example, if you were a Tigrayan and you lost your son or your brother because of the [1998-2000] war and I say "I am an Eritrean", I am expecting you to say: "You are the one who killed my son!". However, while being grateful to the Ethiopian government for the possibility of attending university, he felt a deep sense of insecurity and mistrust towards local institutions and people due to the lack of resolution of the 1998-2000 war (cf. Massa

2016). Like the majority of refugees I met, Solomon took the contradictions of being a refugee in an "enemy country" very seriously, and relied on the event of the war as a filter through which to measure and interpret his daily life. This feeling was particularly strong when he referred to his relationships with Tigrayans, who he expected to have greater resentment for the war.

Like many of his peers, Solomon understood the apparently benevolent attitude of the Ethiopian government as false, hiding "a secret agenda" aimed at increasing its international prestige and continuing its battle against Eritrea. In their view, by opening public universities the Ethiopian government was attempting to bring young Eritreans on side with the ultimate aim of annexing Eritrea or establishing a new federation, and thus finally getting access to the Red Sea and control over Badme - the village in which the war had erupted and that had long been disputed. In light of this, it is not surprising that mistrust, fear and insecurity were some of the principal feelings characterizing Solomon's life in Mekelle: like many others, he was afraid of losing his status, ending up in prison or, even worse, being repatriated, as had happened during the 1998-2000 conflict to many Eritrean citizens living in Ethiopia. These interpretations contributed towards fueling Solomon's desire for further mobility and represented some continuities with his past in Eritrea, such as the feeling of being constantly under siege, the lack of control over his own life and the impossibility of taking those steps (e.g., reaching self-sufficiency, getting married, helping his family) that would allow him to achieve the social status of adulthood (Treiber 2009).

The 2018 peace agreements between Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and President of Eritrea Isayas Afewerki partially reshaped this situation. As Solomon explained to me through social media at the end of 2018, when he had moved to Addis Ababa, he and his friends were suspicious about the relationship between Abiy and Isayas, and speculated on what the consequences might be for them. When it became clear that the peace agreement would not improve their present and their future in Ethiopia or Eritrea, he told me: "Things change, but the situation is always the same for us". Again, they were afraid that the agreement was the prelude to the end of Eritrea as an independent country and that they could be the victims of that. Moreover, while the situation of conflict had until then placed Eritrean refugees in an uncomfortable position with respect to the Ethiopian government, the peace made them feel vulnerable to possible interference by the Asmara government, increasing the fear of repatriation and deportation. Furthermore, although the Ethiopian government had adopted more inclusive refugee reception policies since 2019,[6] the implementation of these measures was slow. Finally, the repeated announcements of the closure of the Hitsats refugee camp and the suspension of the recognition of refugee status through the *prima facie* mechanism (which makes obtaining the right to asylum relatively easy) contributed towards maintaining a high sense of insecurity.

Conclusions

Through the lens of the event, in this article I have tried to explore some of the micro-social effects of the historical and social transformations involving the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea during the EPRDF period. Although Mekelle was at the core of the EPRDF establishment, my attention has focused on its "margins", namely on the biographies and everyday lives of those who, due to their migratory trajectories or their citizenship, were simultaneously inside and outside of the Ethiopian federation, and whose marginality was defined precisely by the historical caesuras under investigation. Rather than reconstructing the political and historical dynamics around these events, I have scrutinized how they were embodied in the personal experiences, migratory movements and social and intimate relationships of those people who migrated from Eritrea to Tigray in the 1990s and 2000s, both as Ethiopian returnees and Eritrean refugees. Following the anthropological scholarship on the event, I have taken into account both people's ordinary lives and their narratives. While it is in everyday life that events manifest their effects (Das 2006), it is through narration that occurrences are transformed from individual incidents into socially meaningful collective events (Jackson 2005). Moreover, since narratives are always contextual, this transformation does not occur once for all, and the period in which I collected these narratives (2013-2019) is crucial for understanding their structures and meanings.

A deep imbrication of continuity and rupture seems to characterize people's experiences of the events under consideration, that is the Eritrean independence, the 1998-2000 war, and the 2018 peace agreements. All of these historical watersheds have brought about critical changes for the people and communities involved, showing the generative power of events (Kapferer 2010). At the same time, my ethnographic research also highlights a number of elements which endured in time and space, demonstrating how continuity and transformation interlock in a complex reality (Hoffman, Lubkemann 2005). On the one hand, these events are part of the longer history of the Eritrean-Ethiopian border, marked by connection and separation, alliance and hostility, and intimacy and estrangement. On the other hand, if observed from below, events cannot be confined within the historical periods in which they occur. In this article, I presented some of the ways in which these events and the border around which they occurred were inscribed in people's biographies, causing unexpected migrations, social fragmentation or economic collapse. By penetrating the emotional, moral and interpretative frames through which people navigated their daily lives, they went well beyond the immediate occurrence of the event, with their reverberations still felt years later.

Henok's story shows how, despite the fact that the war and his repatriation have radically changed his life course, both his daily practices and his job commitments revealed a strong connection with his past in Asmara and his sense of self as a *wedi Asmara*. His case also demonstrates how "modernity" represents a stable marker of the Eritrean-Ethiopian border, maintaining this role even when the pole of the dichotomy between

modernity-non modernity was partially reversed in 2018. Solomon's story demonstrates the long-lasting effects of the 1998-2000 war from the perspective of a young man who did not directly experience the violence of those years, but who acknowledges it as a critical event, able to influence his present life and his desires for the future. Taken together, the two cases show differences and similarities, continuities and fractures in the ways in which the three events have been experienced by ordinary people.

The centrality of these margins has been reaffirmed by the turmoil that erupted in Tigray in November 2020 and is still ongoing at the time of writing (August 2021), despite the ceasefire proclaimed at the end of June 2021. Indeed, regardless of the historical and proximate causes of the war between the federal government led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the TPLF, the conflict has been characterized by the participation of the Eritrean army alongside the Ethiopian National Defense Force.[7] As often happens during what Mary Kaldor calls "new wars" (Kaldor 1999), attacking and terrorizing civilians through killings, looting and other violence have not just been a side effect of the war, but one of the goals of the war strategy. According to many sources, some of these atrocities have been committed by Eritrean troops both on Ethiopian citizens and Eritrean refugees. Eritrean soldiers have been accused of perpetrating massacres and rapes in Tigrayan villages and towns and of looting their factories, private property, health facilities, universities and schools.[8] They also have been accused of attacking the Hitsats and Shimelba refugee camps, resulting in the death of humanitarian workers and refugees and the destruction of infrastructures to the point that the UNHCR decided to close them. Tens of thousands of Eritrean refugees have been suffering violence and insecurity and have been forced to flee to other refugee camps in Tigray and Sudan, to nearby towns such as Mekelle or Shire, or to Addis Ababa, for their perceived affiliation with one side or the other. Some were forcibly repatriated to Eritrea, confirming the fears that arose in 2018 with the launch of the peace process.[9]

Even though it is currently impossible to predict the outcome of the conflict, it is quite certain that it will have a profound impact not only on regional and global dynamics, but also on the everyday experiences of those who incorporate the border into their life and practices as well as on the social boundaries and collective representations that I have explored in this article. Eritrean refugees' insecurity and fears are certainly escalating, both among those living in the refugee camps located in the tormented region of Tigray, who have witnessed the presence of Eritrean troops for months, and among those in Addis Ababa and other Ethiopian towns. Due to the alliance between Abiy and Isayas, the latter has increased his ability to control Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, also through the bourgeoning presence in Ethiopia of spies loyal to the PFDJ government, if the rumours are to be believed. Moreover, some refugees are afraid of being mistaken for Tigrayans by non-Tigrinya-speaking Ethiopians. In continuity with what happened after the 1998-2000 war, violence seems to reinforce the rhetoric of the enmity between Tigrayans and Eritreans. The resentment of the former has particular

value among returnees, since it acts as a further step in their process of loosening symbolic ties with Eritrea and of strengthening homemaking in Tigray, which my visit in 2019 had already highlighted. "They took us back thirty years" is a sentence that many returnees in Mekelle used when commenting on the looting carried out by the Eritrean soldiers. Thirty years is the span of time in which the EPRDF was in power, fueling many people's dreams of well-being and progress. Once again, the rhetoric of development and modernity emerges as the social lens through which people look at events and construct their difference with the Other across the Eritrean-Ethiopian border.
However, as I have already mentioned, across the border between Eritrea and Tigray the categorization of friends and enemies is always shifting, and what appears to be a stable alliance or hostility can rapidly change following new wars and political events. As Tronvoll states (2009: 2), in order to understand politics and war in the Horn of Africa, the point is not "knowing at any time who are enemies and allies [...] but figuring out the patterns of transformations – how enemies shift to become allies, and vice versa". In this light we should not only take contingent political events into consideration, but also investigate how these events settle in people's biographies and narratives and reverberate with past events, that is, we should linger on the continuities that persist under the surface of change.

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NOTES:

1 - The UNMEE terminated its mandate due to some restrictions imposed by the Eritrean government and the cutting off of fuel supplies that made it impossible for the operation to carry out its tasks.

2 - To protect the privacy of my research participants, I changed their personal names and some details of their life stories. I am grateful to my research participants for sharing with me their time and their experience.

3 - Despite Tigray and Eritrea being home to a variety of languages, religions and ethnicities, this article is focused on people sharing a language (Tigrinya), religion (Christian Orthodox Church), and other cultural and social configurations.

4 - Borders were not unknown in the pre-colonial Horn of Africa, where different conceptions of the border competed (Clapham 1996). Before the colonial and post-colonial era the linguistic community of Tigrinya speakers was characterized by continuous processes of the construction and demolition of social boundaries related to geographical communities and political powers (Smidt 2010).

5 - The Eritrean towns and countryside have attracted workers from Tigray at least since colonial times (Chelati Dirar 2009; Bereketeab 2010). The returnees who participated in my research had moved (or their parents had moved) to the current Eritrea during the 1970s and 1980s.

6 - In line with the UNHCR's New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016), the Ethiopian Refugee Proclamation of 2019 promotes refugees' self-reliance and social and economic inclusion.

7 - *Eritrea confirms its troops are fighting in Ethiopia's Tigray*, «Aljazeera», 17 April 2021, available at www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/17/eritrea-confirms-its-troops-are-fighting-ethiopias-tigray.

8 - *Dit is een humanitaire ramp in ontwikkelinghttps*, «VRT NWS», 20 December 2020, available at www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/12/20/vrtnws-als-eerste-in-oosten-van-tigray-in-ethiopie-het-geweld/. Summary with English subtitles available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkvOfC9q-n8.

9 - *Statement attributable to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi on the situation of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia's Tigray region*, 14 January 2021. Available at www.unhcr.org/news/press/2021/1/600052064/statement-attributable-un-high-commissioner-refugees-filippo-grandi-situation.html.

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