



The Ethiopian Borderlands: Essays in Regional History from Ancient Times to the End of the 18th Century

Richard Pankhurst

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Historical studies of Ethiopia, like those of other countries often tend to concentrate on events at or near the centre of political power, and devote far too little attention to other areas. Concentration on the interior is intensified in the Ethiopian case by the imbalance of archaeological and literary sources, which are infinitely richer for the centre of the country than for the borderlands, particularly those to the south and west.

The present very tentative account attempts at least in part to redress the balance by shifting attention to the "peripheral" regions, which, though of central importance to their own inhabitants, tend to receive relatively little attention in studies of the Ethiopian region as a whole. The coverage of such areas in these pages is, however, also unbalanced, for it reflects the geographically very unequal availability of sources. The attention accorded to different places at different times is thus based less on their actual importance than on the historical records at our disposal. It seemed more useful to present such data as is available for each area more or less as it stands rather than to compress or expand it in accordance with any imposed schema which would doubtless also be fairly arbitrary.

The nature of the sources has also greatly influenced the subject matter covered. Most Ethiopian chronicles and other historical documents, both Christian and Muslim, are largely preoccupied with war. The story they tell, and which thus finds its way into these pages, thus often focuses on bloodshed and rapine rather than on the more significant events of everyday life for which data is often sadly lacking. Where information on such matters is available it has, however, been presented in detail.

There can, however, be no denying the importance, and destructiveness, of war in the period under discussion, which extends to the end of the eighteenth century. The battles of this time, irrespective of their rights and wrongs as seen by their protagonists, were often most debilitating. Religious conflicts, though ostensibly fought for the highest motives, were no exception. The great migrations, though later a source of pride or nostalgia for the survivors' descendants, were often accompanied by much fighting and numerous casualties.

The picture of warfare here presented is inevitably often one-sided, for we have been obliged to rely on the historical records available from one side or another. Seldom are sources available simultaneously from both sides. A one-sided account, we may argue, is, nevertheless, better than no account at all.

Traditional Ethiopian armies in the period under review differed from those of modern times, in that they had neither pay nor rations, let alone any commissariat system of supply. Such armies, irrespective of their origin, and whether composed of highlanders or lowlanders, Christians, Muslims, or animists, lived in large measure on the lands through which they passed. This resulted willy nilly in extensive looting, which took place in the soldiers' own homeland and the lands through which they passed, no less than in those with which they were at war. Some of the fiercest fighting of this period was between territories of the borderlands and those in the central highlands, but no less violent conflicts were waged among the states on the periphery themselves, as well as by rival contenders for control of the interior. This unsatisfactory, and often tragic, situation was brought to an end only by military reforms, based on the principle of a paid army, first conceived in the second half of the nineteenth century by Emperor Tewodros II, and haltingly

introduced a generation later by Emperor Menilek. Peace in the last analysis was made possible only by the eventual unification of the whole area.

The movement, and above all the quartering, of troops throughout much of the country over the centuries was, on the other hand, also an integrating factor. It led in various areas, perhaps most noticeably in Ifat in the east as well as in the Oromo-occupied territories of the south, to considerable ethnic intermarriage, and hence to the extensive cultural assimilation of peoples.

Fighting in the period under review was almost invariably accompanied not only by killing and destruction, but also by the extensive capture of slaves, which led to no small loss of lives and property, Slaves, if not exported, were for the most part assimilated by the victors, and thus led to a great further inter-blending of peoples and cultures.



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