Christopher Clapham is a doyen of scholarship on twentieth and twenty-first century Ethiopian politics. He has published extensively not only on Ethiopia, but also on the Horn of Africa and the African continent at large. His two previous monographs on Ethiopia, Haile Selassie’s Government (Prager 1969), and Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia (Cambridge 1990) have been standard references on the topics addressed in the two books. His various articles and conference papers on Ethiopia have been additional sources of information and insights for students of modern Ethiopian politics.


The book contains six chapters. Chapter 1 deals with the ‘power of landscape’, a discussion of the Horn’s geography and its impact on societies and histories. Chapter 2 addresses histories of state creation and collapse. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 deal with Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somali states, respectively. Chapter 6 summarizes the entire work and reflects on the whole region, including its global importance.

The author states that the book addresses the ‘dynamics of state formation and decay’ (p. 2) in the Horn of Africa, its ‘primary concern’ being ‘with developments since 1991’ (p. 5). He writes: ‘It is the central argument of the book that the dynamics of the Horn are essentially home grown’ (p. 2). The external powers that intervened in the Horn were ‘absorbed into the existing structures of the region’. The author states that the Horn is distinct from the rest of Africa in three fundamental ways. First, despite secessionist movements that emerged in many parts of Africa, it was only in the Horn that they succeeded. In 1991, Eritrea and Somaliland de facto seceded from Ethiopia and Somalia, respectively. Two decades later, in 2011, South Sudan became the third region to join the list of successful secessions.

The second uniqueness of the Horn lies in its geography, highland and lowland rubbing shoulders in ways unique in Africa. Clapham took John Markakis’s classification of Ethiopia into highland core, lowland periphery, and highland periphery and applies it to the whole region of the Horn (p. 9). Clapham sees the history of the Horn as having been conditioned by its geomorphological features whereby the highland core dominated the peripheries, and to which the latter reacted (p. 9).

The third uniqueness of the Horn lies in its ‘non-colonial’ status. Although Eritrea and the Somali entities were European colonies, Clapham categorizes them under the term of ‘non-colonial’. What does Clapham mean when he calls the Horn ‘non-colonial’? He attributes non-coloniality in the Horn to the presence in the region of the ‘only indigenous sub-Saharan African state, the Ethiopian empire’ (p. 3). As such, given the weight and centrality of Ethiopia in the Horn, and given that it was never colonized, the other states of the Horn that were colonized ‘were subordinated to non-colonial dynamics to a degree that did not occur elsewhere’ (p. 3). In other words, what made the Horn’s dynamics ‘non-colonial’ is the hegemony of a non-colonial state, Ethiopia, over those who were colonized by Europeans - Eritrea and the Somali states.

This is a major thesis, one that was not advanced before in studies of the Horn. The thesis has a major flaw, however. Although Ethiopia was not colonized, the other states and peoples in the Horn region, and inside some parts of Ethiopia itself, saw it as a colonial power that ruled over them as colonial subjects. Accordingly, from their perspective, what made the Horn unique was not its being ‘non-colonial’, but rather of being subjected to a different kind of colonial domination. What made it different is that the perceived colonial power was not European, but African. All nationalist movements in the Horn of Africa, from Eritrea to Somalia, including the

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**The Horn Breaks African State Norms**

**Teshale Tibebu**

*The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay*

by Christopher Clapham

The Italian colony of Eritrea and the British colony of Somaliland Protectorate became the new states of the Horn, born out of the fracture of Ethiopia and Somalia. Here, the Horn proves to be in line with, not different from, the rest of Africa.

Clapham sees Ethiopia as the key to the Horn of Africa, as the dominant powerhouse of the region, the ‘prison through which all the powers of the Horn passed’ (p. 188). He discusses Ethiopia in great detail, delving deep into its history, state structure, power relations, and regional hegemony. The other regions of the Horn, Eritrea and the Somali entities, are discussed to a large degree in relation to Ethiopia. The chapter on Eritrea is mostly focused on Ethiopia’s failure to live up to its promised potential. He called Ethiopia ‘one of the greatest tragedies in the modern history of the Horn of Africa’, even as he appreciates the ‘quite extraordinary experience through which Eritrea came to independence’ (p. 112).

In the Horn, he sees Eritrea as ‘ever the spoiler in regional politics’ (p. 179). He acknowledges that for Clapham, a ‘more rational and able Eritrean struggle for independence ended up in a failed state unable to fulfill its dream of prosperous Eritrea. Clapham’s discussion of Somalia is not different. Here too, failure is the key. The pan-Somali nationalist movement inspired by the idea of ‘Greater Somalia’ ended up not with the enlargement of Somalia, but with its fragmentation and collapse. Somalia is the failed state par excellence in the Horn.

Clapham barely discusses Djibouti, devoting only five pages to it. In what he calls the ‘Djibouti anomaly’, he refers to its ‘quite exceptional level of stability’ (p. 171). Given how critical Djibouti is for the region, especially Ethiopia, and given its global importance, Clapham should have discussed Djibouti in more detail. Instead, he calls it a ‘thoroughly neo-patrimonial little state under the rule of a family oligarchy’ (pp. 172-73). The irony is that this ‘little state’ was the most stable in the Horn, while fire was raging all around.

As compared with Eritrea and Soma lia, Clapham has more positive things to say about ‘internal colonialism’, ‘manifest destiny’, etc., belie the thesis of the ‘non-colonial’ nature of the Horn predicated on Ethiopian non-coloniality. The conquered subjects of Menilek’s empire, at any rate their elite spokespersons, saw Ethiopia as a colonial power, not as a non-colonial entity. That is the key for understanding the dynamics of state formation and collapse in the Horn, the subject of the book under review.

We also need to be reminded that when Eritrea and Somaliand formed their own state in 1991, they did so along the lines of the European colonial cartography.

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Clapham has a different take on the President of Eritrea, Isayas Aferwerki: Isayas, despite (or because of) his evident skills as an insurgent leader, simply lacked the capacity to make the transition from fighter to ruler of an independent state that was demonstrated to such a striking degree by Meles in Ethiopia. He remained a street fighter, preoccupied with maintaining and developing his power base. Despite the lashing out whenever these were threatened, but lacking any wider vision of the kind that Eritrea desperately needed (pp. 129-30).

Clapham’s insulting remark that Isayas was unable to make the transition from insurgent to leader of state ignores the fact that the EPLF had been a government in its ‘liberated areas’ for many years, and that, when it captured Asmara in 1991, it already had a state in place, and Isayas was its head.

One wonders why Clapham does not have the same harsh words against Meles and his regime for the massacre in the aftermath of the post-2005 elections, or the innumerable reports of human rights violations under his rule. Indeed, in the pages where he discusses the 2005 elections (pp. 86-92), Clapham does not even mention the massacre of 193 people (by the government’s own admission), the declaration of emergency, the incarceration of opposition leaders, and the imprisonment of thousands of people. All he says is the government was able to impose control (p. 91). The question is, ‘How did the government “impose control”?’. Clapham has a high regard for EPRDF and its leadership. In one quite remarkable statement, he wrote about the peaceful succession of power when Haile Mariam Desalegn became the new Prime Minister after the death of Meles. He wrote, ‘From the decline of the Gondarine monarchy in Ethiopia in the later eighteenth century, through to the present day, it is difficult to find any unambiguous case of peaceful transition to the highest position in the state’ (p. 102).

Clapham ignores the simple fact that Haile Mariam was, and still is, a member of the same ruling party EPRDF, and that it was Meles himself who hand-picked and groomed him to be the vice-premier. Haile Mariam replacing Meles is not a change of regime or party. Clapham also praised the fact that succession struggles in post-insurgent regimes require ‘struggle credentials’, which Haile Mariam had not. But, again, it was Meles who hand-picked Haile Mariam. No one in EPRDF would challenge Meles’s choice. Moreover, there is the EPRDF tradition of ‘democratic centralism’ which rules out ‘succession struggles’.

Clapham closes his book with this last paragraph:

At a much more basic level, Islam threatens to empower the peripheral of the Horn against the centre, by providing a source of ideologically inspired alliance to other and notably financial resources, and in the process reactivating a very ancient characteristic of the region in which the ‘highland core’ (not only in Ethiopia, but also in Eritrea) has not been viewed throughout this book the relatively stable centre from which power ultimately emanates, may instead be threatened by its peripheries. Outside powers may not have been constant in the Horn, yet it was continually in flux, in which patterns of state creation and decay form and reform, in response to the ever-changing relations between highland and lowland, Christianity and Islam, zones of settled governance and zones of statelessness. It would be foolish to assume that these tensions are, or will ever be, resolved (pp. 192-3; emphasis added).

In other words, the Horn will be the Horn, and nothing else. It is a region that comes back to what it left before, in never-ending cycles. The protagonists, who are antagonists, repeat the same pattern of conflict and confrontation because they are irredescently divided into highland and lowland, Christianity and Islam, statehood and ‘statelessness’, etc. That such a view is put forward by Clapham is quite troubling. It freezes history; it assumes things never change in this region. So, perhaps, per Clapham, we may need to get ready for the second coming of Ahmad Ibrahim al-Ghazzi anytime in the future.

One year after the publication of Clapham’s book, the Horn began to witness a remarkable phenomenon. Dr. Aby Ahmid was elected Prime Minister of Ethiopia in April 2018. Soon, he carried out sweeping reforms. Top on the list was a call for peace with Eritrea. He visited Eritrea, and Isayas came to Ethiopia. The man Clapham called a ‘street fighter’, one incapable of making the transition to a statesman, was warmly welcomed by hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians. Perhaps, against Clapham’s gloomy prediction, the Horn could change for the better, and not repeat the cycles of the past. One, of course, cannot review a book based on events that took place after it was published. Yet, if scholars tend to ‘see’ the future, then Clapham may have been too eager to dismiss the hopes of the Horn as being tied to its dismal past. The people of the Horn have the capacity to change their future for the better. The bright light on the horizon of the Horn may be just the beginning.

Overall, in The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay, Clapham provides a synopsis of one of the most complex regions in the world. His insights are informed by more than half-a-century of research and writing on the region, especially Ethiopia. Written in beautiful prose and smooth flow, The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay provides overall knowledge of the region’s politics of the last three decades.