

War and the Politics of Identity: The Making of Enemies and allies in the Horn of Africa, by Kjetil Tronvoll. NY: James Curry, 2009. Xiv+239pp. ISBN 978-1-84701-612-6 (James Curry).

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Kjetil Tronvoll's book is undoubtedly a prime achievement as an ethnographic study of war, its multifarious "action meanings" (in contrast to "act meaning")², its recursive impacts on self identity, and the (process of) creation and preservation of "othering" therein. It mainly focuses on the impact of war on the conceptualization of identities, with specific emphasis on the making, unmaking and remaking of allies and enemies. The case chosen to illustrate all these is the Eritrean-Ethiopian war of 1998-2000. The author makes the judicious decision of not leaving the impact of (or rather the construction of) "war" at any level of the Ethiopian body politic. He wittingly navigates all the way from the "micro" to the "macro" levels of the Ethiopian discursive and socio-political systems (if we, of course, endorse Foucault's "archaeology" rather than "geneology").

What might initially fascinate, in the book, those of us who have been tinkering with postmodernist-like "linguistic turn" is the author's focus on "the different", "the small", "the short", "the marginalized", "the unheard of", rather than the "obvious", "the grandiose", "the official", "the cacophonous". The interpretist paradigm to social science research owes him a great deal when he attempts to look at "war and suffering from the point of view of those who fight it and suffer through it" (back cover). Reversing the positivist *grand recit*, Tronvoll opts for the interpretist *petit recit*, while still not totally alienated from the former. While such an approach of straddling between paradigms might not be welcomed by some (say, Stoker and David, 2002), his unrelenting quest for understanding and interpretation tends to make the book fascinating at least for those who subscribe to the author's paradigmatic underpinnings.

The book has eight chapters plus a postscript. It begins with a theoretical discussion on the making of enemies and allies, where the author unpacks his major analytic framework. He mainly calls into account the common adage that war unifies in-groups and also maintains that identity boundaries are not just to separate but also to connect. Before going to his main case, the Eritrean-Ethiopian war, he adverts to some politico-cultural aspects of highland Ethiopia and the making of enemy images in Tigray from a historical perspective. This spans the period between mid-nineteenth century to 1991. Chapter four and five take up the discussion on the creation/swinging of "friends" and

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² These two words are used by some social scientists to designate the objectivist, "outsider", interpretation of the actions of a people under study ("act meaning"), on the one hand, and the attendance to their own interpretations from the inside ("action meaning"), on the other.

"enemies" and the complexity thereof, by grassroots Tigrayans during the 1998-2000 war. This especially hooks up Tigrayans with the Amhara and Eritrean "others".

Chapter six tries to demonstrate the further complexities in the discourses/imaginings of the apparent in-groups (Ethiopians) apparently overwhelmed by the vociferous official discourse in a bid to flare up sturdy "Ethiopian" nationalism that can resist Eritrean offensive. The voices of opposition parties and some people from the southern part of Ethiopia are used to exemplify this. The discussion on the state-orchestrated "othering" of those residing in Ethiopia is taken up in the seventh chapter. The Ethiopians with Eritrean origin and the Oromos were, it is argued, to be singled out as targets of this attempt at "purification" of the nation. While the conclusion tries to explain the Ethiopians' readiness to defend the motherland albeit subscribing to nationalisms in the plural, the postscript seeks to show the more recent instances of EPRDF/TPLF's entanglement with enemy-making in both the internal as well as regional contexts. The central arguments in all these remain to be those laid out in chapter one: enemies and allies both exist and recurrently shift both inside and outside a group apparently "held up" by a "boundary".

As path breaking as they seem, some of Tronvoll's assumptions and assertions may raise doubts, to say the least. His major hypothesis are but among these. The first (drawing from Barth) is that boundaries not only divide but also connect (Chapter One). While we can understand what Tronvoll has in mind when he says this, the way it is stated may fall short of agreeable accuracy. At times of war, it is obvious; people do shift their identities and their allies and enemies. Old friends give way to new ones, the former now taking an enemy image, the latter an ally. This presupposes boundary reallocation. The boundary which divided the old enemies now loses its significance and is reallocated to divide one's group from the new enemy. In this manner, when old enemies stand up together to the challenge of the new common enemy, hither-to separated people now get connected.

What we are witnessing here is not when people are connected because of boundaries but when they connect *despite old exclusive boundaries and in the frame of new inclusive boundaries*. Boundaries do not connect, but people are connected across them, and when they do so, they may construct a new boundary that embraces them along with the old "others". This is exactly what Tronvoll's own empirical findings show. When confronted with the Eritrean offensive, he tries to argue, Tigrayans relocated their alliance from their old brothers, the *kebessa* (Eritrean highlanders), to the group of people they had considered their enemies: the Amhara (Chapters four and five). When this happened, Tigrayans unclenched their fist *across* and *despite* the old boundary between them and the Amharas and invoked another identity which they deemed would join the two together: *Habesha*. The old boundary never in any way assisted this to happen. It didn't connect.

The second major point of concern is the author's immersion in the debate whether war unites people or not (for instance, Chapter one). He is of the opinion that it doesn't necessarily do, and the whole book is mainly dedicated to proving this notion. The problem, however, with such an assertion, when taken to stand as a theoretical supposition, is that it may not be more than a truism. It is sensible to endorse that the Eritrean-Ethiopian war didn't bring catholic unification among Ethiopians. Ethiopian nationalism, as the author argues, came in the plural. This means that when different groups of Ethiopians formed their own nationalisms, people in each group were united in their own ways, each group in its own mode locked up in its own (war)s with its enemy (ies). When some, for example, were looking at the EPRDF as the/an enemy (pp. 166, 171, etc.) they were united in that direction. At a time when the government was fighting an international war, these people were having the feeling that double wars were being fought: an international war (with Eritrea) as much as an internal one (against EPRDF). This implies that to say war (perceived in the plural) does or does not unify is to risk committing a tautology, because the fact that there are two fighting groups presupposes that there are groups at either side, each fighting in (some sort of) unison. Thus, war, defined comprehensively, *ipso facto*, both unites in a sense and disunites in another. Tronvoll's contention might make sense at a specific level, where "war" is given the precise meaning of Eritrean -Ethiopian war. Even in this sense, one point should be noted. The author's own empirical data attest to the fact that "Ethiopians from all walks of life wanted to take back the land [for example, Badme]" (p 202). Although I myself seriously doubt the soundness of this contention, it does, if correct, show that the specific war did unite all the people in some ways, just as it divided them in others. Although Tronvoll does not deny that such things happened, he has greatly relegated the former to almost a footnote, emphasizing rather the latter.

With regards to his view about the history of Ethiopia, the author is a self-declared "centrist", subscribing to neither the "Greater Ethiopian" nor the "colonialist" Perspectives. He states that he endorses the view that "the Ethiopian state has both deep historical trajectories, on the one hand, and its Amharization and oppressive characteristics, on the other" (p. 25) If we can confirm that he falls under this category, then we can, based on his book, safely place him on the centre right. He seems to give his approval to some of the crucial views of the "Greater Ethiopian" camp. These include his belief that the end of the *zamana mesafent* marked Ethiopia's emergence from "one of the darkest and most troubled periods (p. 37); and more controversially and self-refutingly, that "the Ethiopian myth of origin ... in principle unites all Ethiopian citizens" (p. 171). Apart from the political disquiet these assertions might raise for those in the ethnonationalist camp (this surely is not a problem from an academic point of view), some usually-taken-for-granted views as these may also raise serious questions of empirical validity at least for those working in the positivist-objectivist standpoint.

Finally, his objectivist modernist stance on the timing of the coming to the fore of ethnic consciousness may not tally well with the paradigm he seemed to set his studies towards the beginning. He claims that ethnic movements which have projected contemporary forms of ethnic consciousness into previous historical periods have only fallen into a "misinterpretation" (p. 27) and urges his readers to accept that these only are recent phenomena. From a post-modern perspective, however, this sort of "antiquitization of ethnic history" (just like its apparent adversary, "antiquitization of 'national' history") can be considered as neither a correct nor an incorrect interpretation, but simply as a manifestation of the logic of nationalist discourse. What we are required to do, from this perspective, is not to aspire to separate the "wheat from the chaff", but to understand how nationalist discourses are framed and lived regardless of what the wheat and chaff are and whether they should be separated or not.

These are some insights intended to provoke further thoughts, though. When all is said and done, the amount of time one would spend going through this in-depth and coherent diagnosis of the issues in question, written in an elegant style, is worth it.