

Book Review: The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay by Christopher Clapham

Christopher Clapham should be commended for synthesising a career of scholarship on the Horn of Africa into a short volume written in fluid and engaging prose. Those seeking an introduction to a region which defies easy explanation would struggle to find a better foundational text in paperback, says Nick Branson.

An authority on the Horn of Africa for half a century, Christopher Clapham has produced influential publications on [Imperial Ethiopia](#), the [revolution](#) which led to its demise, and the [guerrilla movements](#) which achieved power in 1991. Two decades since Clapham's last monograph – a volume on [Africa's international relations](#) – his latest examines state-building and secession in this “deeply problematic” region.

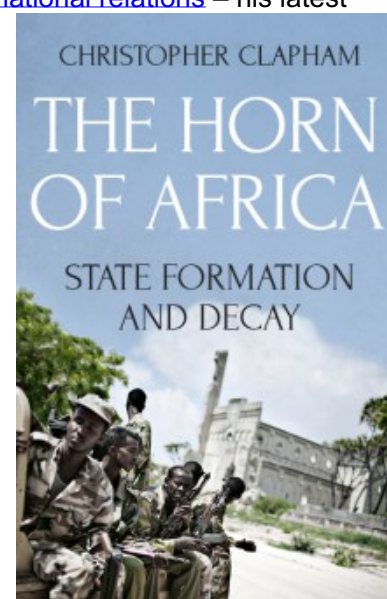
Four polities form the basis for this study: Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Somaliland. Explaining his rationale, Clapham describes how the topography of the Horn has determined land use and forms of social and political organisation. Drawing on [John Markakis](#), he distinguishes between the *highland core*, cool and fertile enough for arable farming; the *lowland periphery*, suited only to pastoralism; and the *highland periphery*, historically one of tropical forest, more recently the site of coffee plantations.

The volume therefore juxtaposes two established states in the highland core with two ongoing state-building projects in the lowland periphery. Djibouti is treated as an anomaly and receives little more attention than the Somali Regional State of Ethiopia. The Sudans and Kenya enter the narrative occasionally, rather than forming an integral part of Clapham's Horn.

Acknowledging the inadvertent hierarchy such a model creates, the author justifies his approach on the ground that the highlands “have historically created the power structures to which the peoples of the peripheries have been, and to a large extent continue to be, subordinated.” Despite his acute awareness of authority, Clapham's characterisation of the “pastoralist zone” as being a land where “conflict is inherent” due to “competition over desperately meagre resources” might strike a twenty-first century reader as outmoded.

In exploring state decay and secession, the unique history of Ethiopia repeatedly comes to the fore. Clapham underlines the tactical brilliance of Emperor Menilek II in defeating Italian forces at Adwa in 1896 and in playing colonial states off against one another. He frames Imperial expansion to the south and west as being “rapidly accelerated in order to pre-empt European conquest.” As with the author's earlier work, there is an emphasis on African agency accompanied by sustained cynicism of outsiders' attempts to influence a region with its own intrinsic dynamics. Clapham argues that “external powers... have been absorbed into the existing structures of the region, and have contributed to conflict (and in some cases also to peace) in ways that owe more to their configuration to local circumstances than anything inherent in those powers themselves.”

International actors are largely absent from the chapters exploring the contrasting projects of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. Clapham's focus is more on how highland social structures and the mentality of guerrilla movements have influenced the conduct of the two regimes. Significant attention is paid to the Ethiopia-Eritrea border war of 1998-2000 and its impact on bilateral relations. The reader is struck by the contrast between that conflict over a relatively small area of highland territory and the ambivalence of lowland pastoralists towards boundaries established by colonial powers. In this vein, Clapham lampoons international efforts to remake the region in a manner which conforms with their expectations of it:



“One of the great gratifications of conflict in Somalia has indeed been the readiness of wealthy foreigners to come up with an ever-flowing stream of resources.”



Horn of Africa seen from space

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Despite his cynicism about external intervention, Clapham is sanguine about Somali resilience, and the ability of local actors to negotiate solutions to seemingly intractable problems. The brief period of governance by the Islamic Courts Union during mid-2006 is described as “a moment remembered nostalgically by many Somalis”, unlike the Ethiopian intervention and the African Union missions which followed. Curiously, Clapham neglects to deal with Kenya’s involvement in Somalia. He does, however, dedicate attention to indigenous state-building in Somaliland, where international interference was notably absent.

A concluding chapter examines nascent attempts at regional integration and cooperation, and the Horn’s external relations. Clapham recognises the paradox that “Ethiopian hegemony represents the central problem in the regional dynamics of the Horn” while stressing that it is currently the only state able to underwrite local stability. He similarly acknowledges that “Ethiopia has almost invariably served as the prism through which outside powers have viewed the region,” but appears unaware that a similar charge might plausibly be levelled at him for juxtaposing the success of the *Habesha* states with the volatility of the adjacent lowlands.

This minor critique aside, Christopher Clapham should be commended for synthesising a career of scholarship on the Horn of Africa into a short volume written in fluid and engaging prose. Those seeking an introduction to a region which defies easy explanation would struggle to find a better foundational text in paperback.

[The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay](#). Christopher Clapham. Hurst Publishers. 2017

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