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Handtke's (1849) map of the Horn of Africa uncovered

by

Jan Nyssen

Department of Geography, Ghent University, Belgium

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As part of our research on historical cartography in the Horn of Africa (Nyssen et al. 2020b; Nyssen et al. 2020a; Nyssen et al. 2019), we uncovered a map prepared by a German atlas printing house in the mid-19th century (Fig. 1):

Handtke, F.H., 1849. Nordöstliches Afrika, Ca. 1:5 600 000. In: Sohr, K., Supplement-Band zum Hand-Atlas der neueren Erdbeschreibung, 85. Flemming, Glogau/Głogów and Leipzig [in German]

This brief essay focuses on mapping of Western Tigray (“Welkai”), which is not only notable for the multiple war crimes committed there during the Tigray War (Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International 2022), but is also a contested area in Ethiopia between the Tigray and Amhara regions. Furthermore, removing these most productive regions from Tigray appears to be part of a strategy to impoverish and subjugate Tigray. Ethiopian regime supporters proudly stated in July 2021: “Let them go! The defeated “Great Tigray” had to abandon the fertile regions it had stolen from the Amharas in the 1990s, and had to retreat to its arid *heimat*. (...) The map of Greater Tigray was twice as large as the current poor Tigray” (De Maegd 2021).

The goal here isn't to prove territorial claims based on one specific map, but rather to demonstrate that a wide range of historical maps and records reveal that territorial organisation has tremendously varied through time.

Map description

In a fascinating presentation on 13 April 2022 at the *Wissenschaftlicher Arbeitskreis Horn von Afrika*, Professor Wolbert Smidt (2022) showed for the first time extracts of a map that contradicts the Gondarine narrative of the history of Western Tigray. In a later detailed search, Handtke's map (1849) could be located at the National Library of Estonia. It is 39 cm wide and 66 cm tall, and it's printed on paper that's been bonded to fabric (Fig. 2). The scale is approximately 1:5 600 000, graphically represented in German miles. Relief is shown by hachures (Collier et al. 2003). The map, based on 1840s diplomatic and other sources, has been produced by lithographic printing, with manual outline colouring, as happened often in atlas preparation up to around 1900 (Witkam 2007).

The work was realised in one of the few stronger cartographic publishing houses in 19th century Germany, managed by Carl Flemming (1806-1878) (Fig. 3). Flemming was aided by cartographer

Friedrich Handtke (1815-1879), who worked on nearly every map assignment for the firm (Brogiato and Fick 1997; Witkam 2007).

Northeast Africa in 1849

The map (Handtke 1849) shows that the sources of the White Nile had not yet been discovered by European explorers; the southernmost part of the map is left blank, with only a few generic names, particularly the “Mond Gebirge” (Mountains of the Moon – throughout this note, quotation marks indicate a literal transcription of calligraphy from the map) and “Endpunkt der 1. Expedition”.

The geography of the Red Sea Coast, Egypt and “Nubia” was fairly well known, as well as that of the northern and central Ethiopian highlands. These were mapped in relative detail for “Tigre”, “Amhara”, and to the south with fuzzy boundaries for “Schoa”. Due to inaccessibility, the physiography of the otherwise well mapped northern highlands holds one major mistake: the Areqwa River, which flows directly to Tekeze R. was erroneously mapped as running parallel to Tekeze and intercepting other affluents such as Giba R. and Werii R. (Fig. 4)

Further south, “Enarea”, “Dschimma” and “Kaffa” are positioned with few details. A generic name “Habesch” is written diagonally across the highlands.

Maps of Northeastern Africa from the nineteenth century provide a lot of information about toponyms, regional names, and the territorial extent of groups, as well as local ideas of boundaries and routes, political claims overlapping, and ethnic conflicts and interactions. They weren't only the work of visiting cartographers and scholars; they were the outcome of intensive local assistance and contact with seasoned local partners who were experts in territorial knowledge and sociopolitical practices (Smidt 2022).

On Handtke's map, Ras Ali's “Amhara” corresponded largely to the current Amhara region, yet with Wollo as a separate entity. The territorial organisation of “Tigre” included the Eritrean highlands (“Baharnagasch”) and the current Tigray region, comprising “Walkayt” and “Waldubba” at the west (Fig. 4). This must not be seen as a unified “country”; rather, within an alliance, the “Tigre” territory denoted a confederate structure of typically largely independent provinces and princedoms, pacified by Dejazmatch Wubie (Prunier 2010). The intersection by rivers that were unpassable during the rainy season contributed to the sovereignty of the provinces within the larger confederation (Nyssen et al. 2019).

By 1849, well before the scramble for Africa, Eritrea had not yet come into existence as a separate territory (Ullendorff 1965), and does not appear on Handtke's (1849) map.

On Handtke's (1849) map, the lowlands at the west of “Habesh” were also poorly defined, with occurrence of names like “Schangalla”, “Kolla” or “Dar El Berta”.

This is one of several historical maps that has been published, and that was omitted in Achamyelch Tamiru's (2019) pamphlet justifying Amharic claims on Welkait, just like the easily accessible references to “Wälqayt in Tegré” by Pankhurst (1990) were omitted.

Historical maps and Gondarine irredentism

Before Handtke, Rigobert Bonne (1771) mapped already (less precise) outlines of a confederate “Tigré”. Overall, these maps demonstrate that the argument that Welkait was *always* a part of

Begemdir cq. Amhara is not based on evidence, apart from a territorial reorganisation in the early and mid-twentieth century. Indeed, the Abyssinian emperors Menelik and Haile Selassie divided the country into provinces, replacing territories that were formerly semi-autonomously governed. As colonial powers did elsewhere, Haile Selassie cut into these existing territories and used this territorial reorganisation as a way to reward his allies. Reversely, the transfer of the Welkait and Tselemti districts from Tigray to the Gondar province was a punishment for Tigray's 1943 uprising against the Empire (Markakis 1987). The resulting provinces were hence constructed along the strength of local powers (zones of influence of major towns), regardless of ethnic composition.

In contrast, contemporary Tigray is a valid territory, whose legitimacy stems from modern federalism's faculty to create a region away from concepts of the imperialist *Menelikian* centralism. In 1991, when the boundaries of the Tigray Region were established as part of federal Ethiopia, historical maps have most probably not been used. Rather, all language maps of the Ethiopian state *in tempore non suspecto* sustain the current extent of the Tigray region. Such is the case for the map of languages of Ethiopia established by Trimmingham (1965), and republished by Westphal (1975) (Figs. 5 and 6).

As historical maps are a subject of research by the Ethiomap research project, with Wolbert Smidt working on maps of the Ethiopian highlands and northern territories, more findings on the context of the 19th century maps are expected.

Access to Handtke's map

A Scholar Google search tends to indicate that this map (Handtke 1849) has so far not been used by historians, geographers or other researchers.

The map is available at the authorised workplace in the National Library of Estonia, Archival Library of the Estonian Literary Museum (Tallinn University of Technology Library, Academic Library of Tallinn University and University of Tartu Library). The scanned map may be accessed and downloaded from their repository at <https://www.digar.ee/arhiiv/nlib-digar:429790>

Other copies are held at Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (München, Germany), at Universitätsbibliothek Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (Eichstätt, Germany), and at the David Rumsey Map Center at Stanford University (USA). The latter also holds a downloadable scan: <https://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY~8~1~33543~1171029:Composite--NO-Afrika->

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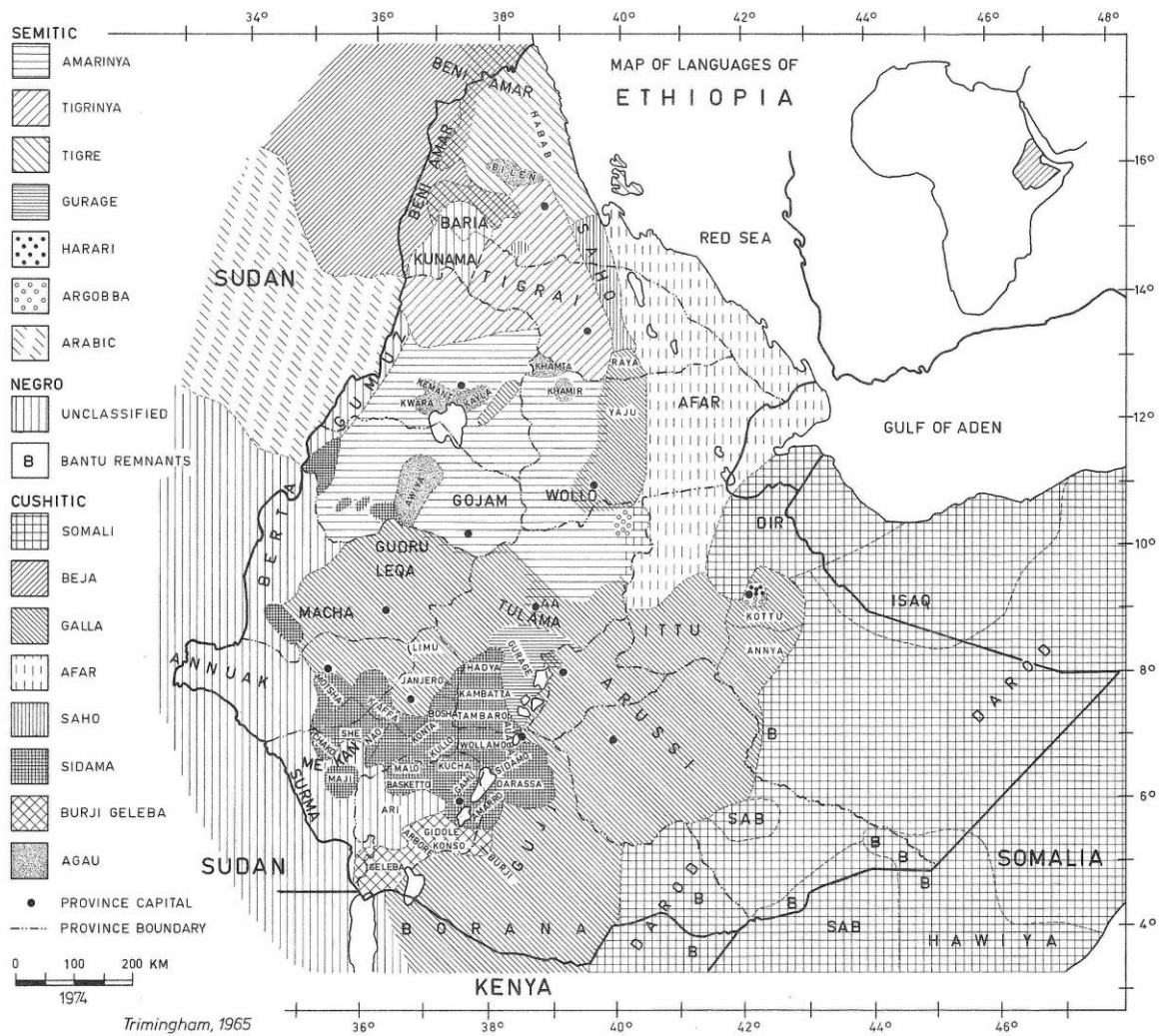


Fig. 5. Map of languages of Ethiopia by Trimingham (1965), republished by Westphal (1975). The map uses the province boundaries of 1974. It is reproduced here as a historical document, without correcting the derogatory terminology for some ethnic groups that was in use at that time.

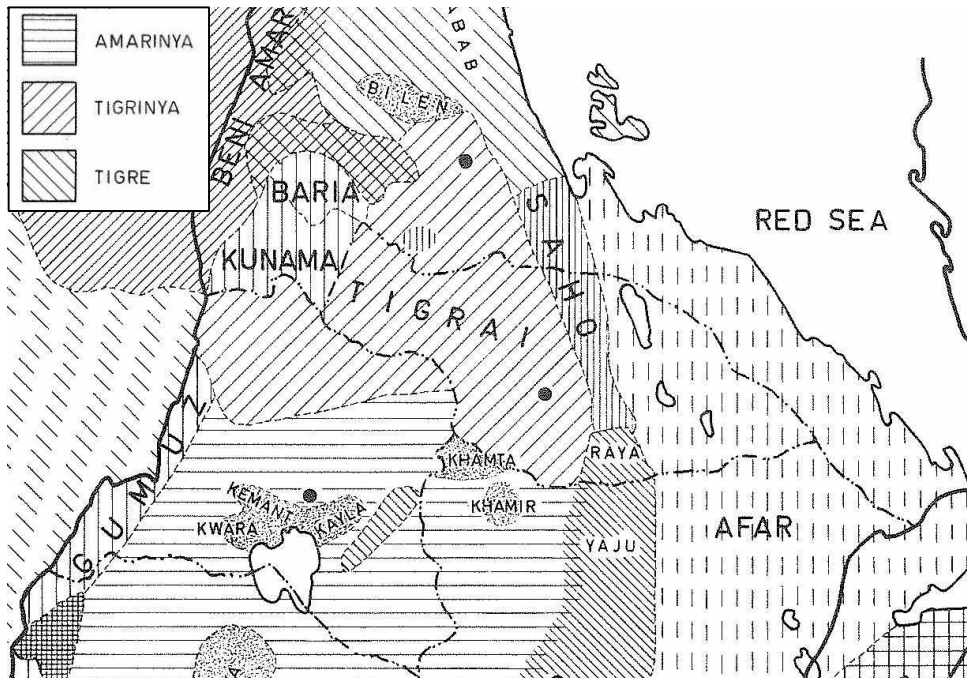


Fig. 6. Languages of northern Ethiopia as mapped by Trimingham (1965), and republished by Westphal (1975). Boundaries of the 1974 provinces are used; the northernmost province, Eritrea, has become independent. The current Tigray Region englobes the Tigrinya-speaking areas of Ethiopia. For detailed legend and circumstantial notes, see Fig. 5.