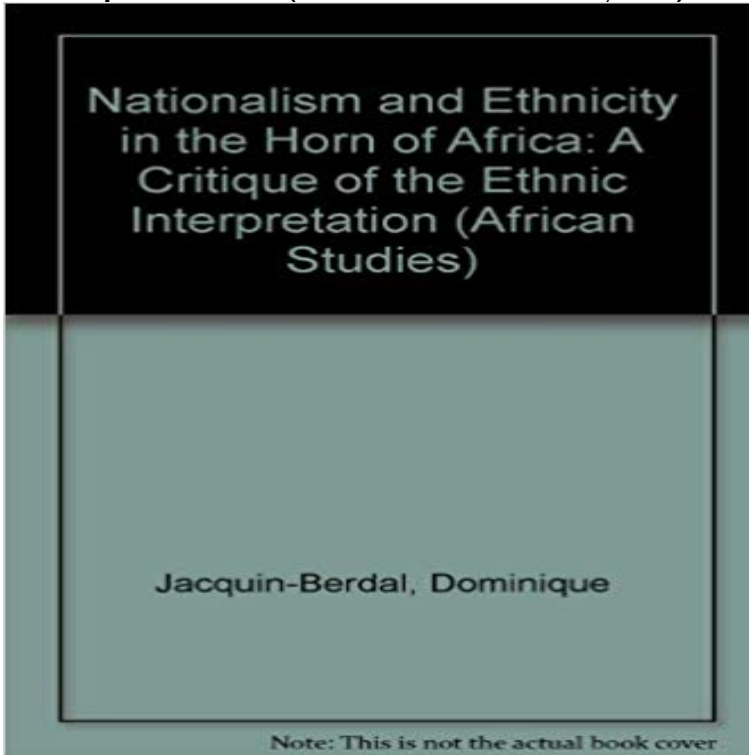


## Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Horn of Africa: A Critique of the Ethnic Interpretation (African Studies, 62)



Dr. Jacquin-Berdal has given us a cogent and lucid defence of a modernist international relations perspective on nationalism. In contrast to current preoccupations with ethnicity, she demonstrates, through a rich and detailed empirical analysis of Eritrea and Somaliland separatism that the colonial territorial state provided the causal basis and motor for the rise of these and other African nationalisms. This book is an important and timely contribution to the theoretical literature on nationalism and to our understanding of contemporary politics in the Horn of Africa. It is important for two reasons. First, since the end of the cold war, the proposition that nations - and hence successful nation-states - invariably spring from an ethnic core has too often gone unchallenged. Those who hold this position tend to regard it almost as a self-evident truth. As Dominique Jacquin-Berdals analysis impressively demonstrates, it is not. Secondly, most students of nationalism, whether they insist on the ethnic ancestry of the modern nation, or view it as an essentially modern construct, implicitly agree that the roots of the nation and nationalism lie within society rather than outside it. Some authors, myself included, have argued that international society has had to accommodate itself to the consequences of nationalism, but the international system itself is seldom seen as playing a major part in the origins of nations and the formation of national identities. Again, this book provides a refreshing and compelling antidote to this conventional wisdom. The book is topical for yet another reason. Ethnic theories of nationalism may be fashionable, but partition along ethnic lines is seldom a practical solution to the numerous national and religious conflicts that regularly disturb the peace of all parts of the world. When the break-up of Yugoslavia was imminent, the then British

Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, urged Croat and Serb leaders to follow the same path that African states had taken after independence. Fearing to open a Pandora's box of irredentist and secessionist claims, in 1964, they opted instead for the doctrine of *uti possidetis*. In other words, they chose to define the right of self-determination as a right to independence within the borders established by the departing colonial powers. With hindsight, and given the ethnic polarisation that had already occurred within Yugoslav society, as well as the very high levels of communal and ethnic conflict that many African countries have had to endure, it might seem that in this case, unusually, a British Foreign Secretary allowed hope to triumph over experience. His advice nonetheless reflected an important reality, namely that most countries will continue to be, as in the past, multi-ethnic, multi-faith and very often multi-lingual as well. One of the great merits of this book is to show how, in the continent that revived the principle of *uti possidetis*, Eritrea, the one country to successfully secede, did so by building a national movement in response to political, strategic and international rather than ethnic pressures. Similarly, it shows how Somalia, the most homogenous political culture in Africa disintegrated as a state, except in the north west where the population re-grouped as the still unrecognised Republic of Somaliland, within the frontiers of the former British protectorate rather than primarily in response to ethnic or clan sentiment. Most nation-states are the result of contingent events long ago. With the passage of time, the political outcome of these historical accidents may or may not come to be accepted as part of the natural order, and hence an integral part of a people's identity. Dr. Jacquin-Berdal has performed an important service in reminding us of this often conveniently forgotten fact.

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