

The «Barrage de Djibouti», from migration barrier to identity building¹

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Abstract

This article presents a particular boundary object, the Barrage erected between 1966 and 1982 around the town of Djibouti. While it was meant to restrain immigration, the population of the town tripled. While it should have maintained French sovereignty, the territory became independent in 1977. Operated mostly by military forces, reinforced by a full set of physical, legal and ideological constraints, this wall represents an important exercise of coercion upon all the inhabitants. Out of its own reality, it produced different effects on society. From a presentation of the making and the evolution of this impressive boundary object, we propose different hypotheses about its role with respect to migration control and identity building. We conclude with some reflections about the place of the Barrage in the typology of boundaries and how it informs us about the function of contemporary walls.

Keywords: Djibouti – Colonial history – French Territory of the Afar and Issa – boundaries – migration – control and identity building

Introduction

Between 1966 and 1982, an impressive boundary object was built in the French Territory of the Afar and Issa:³ the “Barrage de Djibouti”,⁴ called by some “the wall of shame” (*le mur de la honte*⁵). This manifestation of colonial coercion has not been studied much because of the weakness of Djiboutian historiography, and also because the French administrative and military archives are not freely available.⁶ Furthermore, the fact that the Barrage was kept a few years after the

¹ I thank Antoinette Franc de Ferrière for her help in translating this paper into English.

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³ The territory around the Gulf of Tadjoura was called «Côte française des Somalis» (CFS) from 1896 to 1967; then Territoire français des Afars et des Issas (TFAI). At its independence, in 1977, it became the «République de Djibouti». In this article, we will call it Djibouti, not to be confused with the city of Djibouti.

⁴ I published a first description of the Barrage and analysis of its use: Imbert-Vier (Simon) [2010], «Il “barrage” di Gibuti: frontiera inutile o fucina sociale?», *Storia urbana*, n° 128, pp. 109-127 [www.francoangeli.it/riviste/sommario.asp?IDRivista=58].

⁵ Laudouze (André) [1982], *Djibouti : nation carrefour*, Paris, Karthala, p. 56.

⁶ Documents used here come mainly from the Archives nationales d'outre mer (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence, Centre des archives contemporaines (CAC) in Fontainebleau and military

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independence by the Djiboutian government shows the continuity in practices beyond colonial times.⁷ The Barrage was intended to be a solution to problems that are still politically significant today. Even though it was dismantled thirty years ago, some physical remains are still visible. Its impact on the inhabitants' imagination and the representations it generated are also still present in Djiboutian society.

This object calls into question the typology and usage of boundaries, as described in many scientific publications since the Second World War.⁸ Reflecting a great diversity of conception, such publications can globally help in understanding the situation created by the Barrage and analysing its meanings and consequences. In 1938, in reaction to the natural or “civilisation” boundaries proposed by German geopolitists,⁹ French geographer Jacques Ancel¹⁰ placed the Nation at the centre of their definition. Boundaries exist only for what they surround; they are socially constructed objects, the landmark of a “political isobar” between entities. In 1949, Eric Fischer¹¹ insisted that merely by the fact of maintaining their existence, their historicity¹² reinforces their crystallisation by what he calls anthropogeographic factors. The anthropologist Frederik Barth showed, in 1969,¹³ that boundaries define groups but are permeable to individuals who are able to cross them. He advocated the view that boundaries are made to be crossed, to link and not to separate the inhabitants of the borderlands. At the time of the “deconstruction” of the ethnic concept by Jean-Loup Amselle and Elikia M'Bokolo,¹⁴ Igor Kopytoff¹⁵ proposed, in 1987, to see the “internal frontiers”

archives in Château de Vincennes (SHD-G and SHD-T). Most of those concerning the Barrage can be freely consulted only 50 years after their production. Communication of some documents was refused by the French government.

⁷ The Djiboutian head of State is said to have been in charge of it (Absieh Omar Warsama, Botbol (Maurice) [1986], *Djibouti : les institutions politiques et militaires*, Paris, La lettre de l'océan Indien).

⁸ For a general presentation of these questions, see Pradeau (Christian) [1994], *Jeux et enjeux des frontières - Essai de géographie générale*, Talence, Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 362 p.

⁹ Karl Haushofer (1869-1946), inspired by Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904).

¹⁰ Ancel (Jacques) [1938], *Géographie des frontières*, Paris, Gallimard, 210 p. “Il n'y a pas de problèmes de frontières. Il n'est que des problèmes de Nations”, p. 196. His conception inspired the French school of international relations: Renouvin (Pierre), Duroselle (Jean-Baptiste) [1964], *Introduction à l'histoire des relations internationales*, Paris, Armand Colin, 523 p.

¹¹ Fischer (Eric) [1949], «On Boundaries», *World Politics*, vol. 1, n° 2, pp. 196-222.

¹² The link between boundaries and State, within an historical construction process, is illustrated in Febvre (Lucien) [1928], «Frontière : le mot et la notion», *Revue de Synthèse historique*, Paris, XLV, pp. 31-44.

¹³ Barth (Fredrik), ed. [1969], *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, Oslo, 153 p.

¹⁴ Amselle (Jean-Loup), M'Bokolo (Elikia), ed. [1985], *Au cœur de l'ethnie*, Paris, La Découverte, (2nd ed. 1999), 227 p.

¹⁵ Kopytoff (Igor), ed. [1987], *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Society*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 288 p.

– interstitial zones between the boundaries – as the places where identities are built. Almost at the same time, the geographer Michel Foucher published an important synthesis about national boundary lines.¹⁶ He noted that natural boundaries don't exist, all of them being the result of a human construction.

Thus, he concluded that, at least in Africa, the lines themselves seem less artificial than the territories so cut out. Recent empirical work about Africa¹⁷ shows the multiple usage of boundaries by inhabitants. Borders and frontiers are not only State marks, but also resources for their multiple users.

These various conceptions of boundaries confirm the multiplicity of possible points of view. However, we can use some common characteristics to propose a definition. A boundary is a socially and historically constructed linear space, of variable thickness, that can be drawn on a map. It delimits and joins other spaces, and can be crossed and travelled in. It is meaningful and useful for the surrounded entities, but also for their inhabitants, as it creates human realities by its mere existence.

It is within these perspectives that we will present the “wall” erected around Djibouti town to control migrants' circulation and to maintain a constructed “ethnic composition” of the city. To show evidence of some of its *raison d'être*, we will first lay out the main lines of French colonisation in the Horn area, then describe the Barrage itself, its making, its evolution and the concrete situation around it. We will conclude with general considerations about its usage, its boundary characteristics, its role in migration control and in building identities, and what it teaches us about contemporary migration walls.

French colonisation in the Horn of Africa

The Barrage stands as part of the shared history of French colonisation in the Horn. *Confetti d'empire*, Djibouti was the only French-owned territory in continental Africa from 1962 – the year of Algerian independence – up to 1977. The French settlement around the Gulf of Tadjoura began in 1884, motivated by imperial considerations: the need of a coal supply for the fleet between Marseille, Madagascar and Indo-China¹⁸ that would be politically safer than British-owned Aden. On top of this fundamental function, a relationship with the interior of the continent was later built, linked with a colonial and commercial fantasy about Ethiopia. This is why the colony's centre was moved

¹⁶ Foucher (Michel) [1991], *Fronts et frontières - Un tour du monde géopolitique*, Paris, Fayard, (1st ed. 1988), 691 p.

¹⁷ Nugent (Paul), Asiwaju (Anthony Ijaola), ed. [1996], *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits and Opportunities*, London & New York, Frances Pinter, 276 p.; Nugent (Paul) [2002], *Smugglers, Secessionists & Loyal Citizens on the Ghana-Togo Frontier: The Life of the Borderlands since 1914*, Athens, Oxford, Legon, Ohio University Press, James Currey, Sub-Saharan Publishers, 302 p.; Dereje Feyissa, Hoehne (Markus Virgil), ed. [2010], *Borders & Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa*, James Currey, Eastern Africa Series, 205 p.

¹⁸ In 1883 occurred the first bombing of Madagascar and the takeover of Hanoi by Rivière.

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öfrom Obock to the newly created town of Djibouti in the 1890's, and a railway was built from the coast up to Addis Ababa after the Italian defeat in °Adwa in 1896. This project, initially that of a private company, was in fact controlled by the French colonial administration from 1902.¹⁹ Outside of the railway territory in the south of the colony, it was not before the end of the 1920's that the interior of the country started to be militarily invested and managed by the colonial authorities. Only the coastal points were put under colonial control at the end of the 19th century, followed by the southeastern boundary in 1934; the remaining territorial boundaries were established between 1945 and 1955,²⁰ in the framework of French military action against significant local resistance.

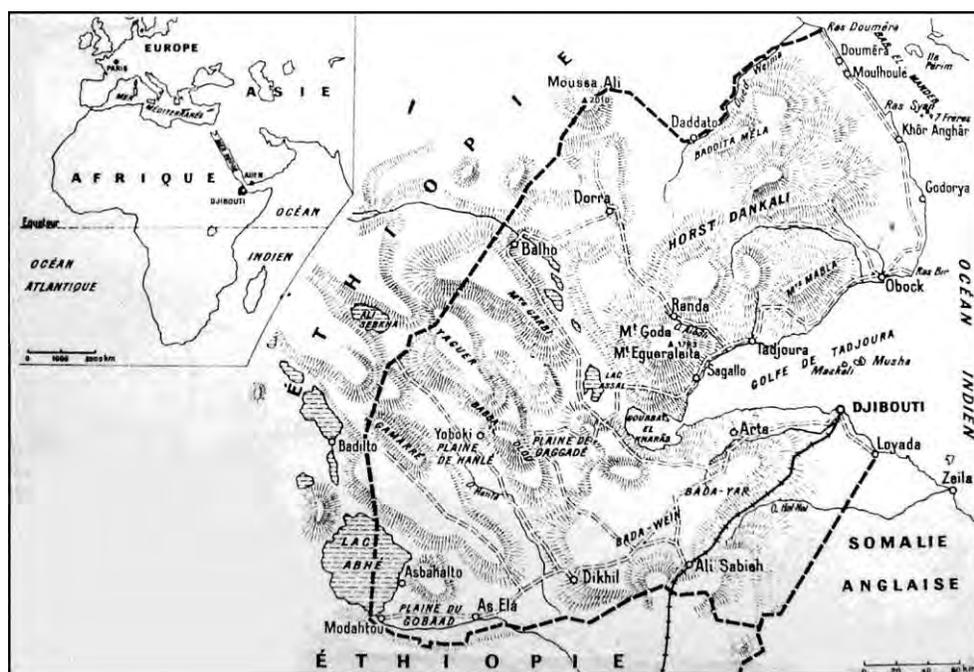


Fig. 1: Côte française des Somalis (CFS) around 1960; from Poinso 1964

The main locus of the colonial situation²¹ was the town of Djibouti, with the port and the railway terminal. Created *ex nihilo* in 1888, it grew from 4000 inhabitants in 1898, to 11,903 in 1932²² and around 19,000²³ in 1939, according

¹⁹ Shiferaw Bekele [1991], «The Ethiopian Railway and British Finance Capital, 1896-1902», *Africa* (Roma), vol. 46, n° 3, pp. 351-374.

²⁰ Those boundaries define a terrestrial territory of about 23,000 km², twice that of Libanon.

²¹ With the meaning proposed by Georges Balandier [1951], «La situation coloniale : approche théorique», *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, vol. 11, pp. 44-79, improved in *Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique Noire*, Paris, PUF, 1955 and 1963. For the definition of «colonial», we also refer to Maxime Rodinson [1967], «Israël, fait colonial ?», *Les Temps modernes*, n° 253bis, pp. 17-88.

²² ANOM 3F2.

to administrative sources. During the Second World War, the population decreased because of massive eviction of African inhabitants and the installation of a first barrier around the town. Then, the population rose to 17,000 in 1947, 40,000 at the beginning of the 1960's, 62,000 in 1967,²⁴ 118,000 in 1972²⁵ and 150,000 inhabitants at the beginning of the 1980's.²⁶ Even if the reliability of those data is uneven and always doubtful, they provide a rhythm and a scale.

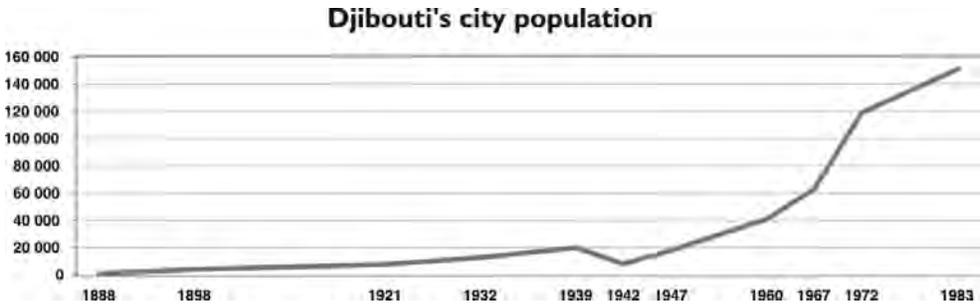


Fig. 2: Growth of the city's population, graph by the author

In the 1950's and mostly 1960's, the population growth accelerated noticeably. This was due mostly to the economic development of the town, with important FIDES²⁷ investments for its harbour to make it a deep-water port for supply and transit, and the creation of a special currency, the Franc Djibouti linked to the dollar, to sustain the commerce.²⁸ The newcomers came mostly from the Horn (Ethiopia and British Somaliland), including Yemen.

Consequently, from the middle of the 1950's, the legal right to live in Djibouti became an important question for the administration and the inhabitants. In 1961 British Somaliland and Italian Somalia were united and became independent as the new Somali Republic, based ideologically upon the claim of a unification of all "Somali territories",²⁹ symbolised by the five parts of its flag's star. Reacting to the inrush of newcomers, evictions of foreigners from Djibouti territory became massive. From one daily eviction decision (*arrêté d'expulsion*) between 1947 and 1959, it grew to five in 1962 and ten in 1967. To avoid saturation of the legal mechanism, the process was then simplified: the administration executed "simple deportation" (*simples*

²³ ANOM Affaires politiques 700.

²⁴ CAC 940263/28.

²⁵ Ibidem, report from General (CR) Magendie, 16/2/1973 (also in ANOM PA351).

²⁶ Lopez-Escartin (Nuria) [1992], *Données de base sur la population de Djibouti*, Paris, Centre français sur la population et le développement.

²⁷ Investment Fund for Economic and Social Development (*Fond d'investissement pour le développement économique et social*), in existence from 1946.

²⁸ Dubois (Colette) [1997], *Djibouti, 1888-1967 - Héritage ou frustration*, Paris, Harmattan, 431 p.

²⁹ For a recent view about Somali, see Hoehne (Markus), Luling (Virginia), ed. [2010], *Milk and Peace, Drought and War. Somali Culture, Society and Politics*, London, Hurst and Company, 437 p.

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*refoulements*³⁰). The deportees were simply gathered up in a camp installed at La Poudrière in 1967, kept by the Foreign Legion,³¹ and then taken by truck to the Somalian boundary, or brought to Ethiopia by train. The available documentation doesn't allow us to detail the evictions very precisely after 1967, but 8000 persons were expelled in 1971, which amounts to more than twenty daily and nearly 10% of the town's population.

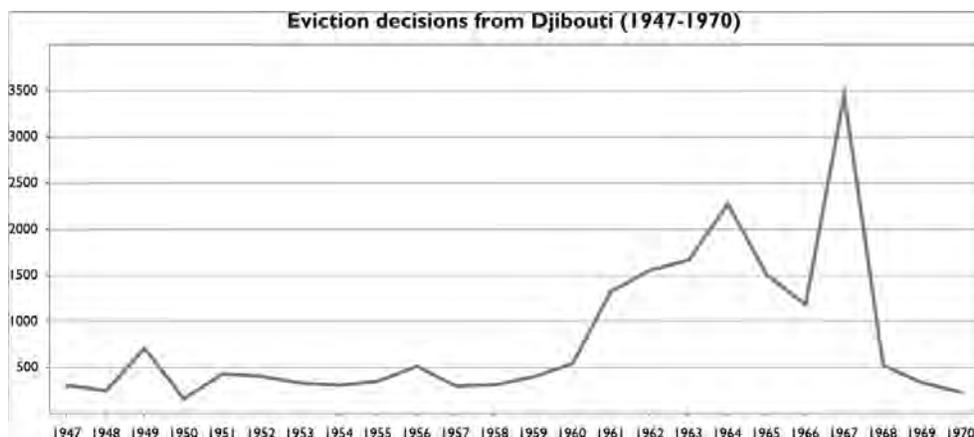


Fig. 3: Eviction decisions from Djibouti (1947-1970), graph by the author

The 1956 *loi-cadre*³² transformed all “French autochthonous” people from second-class nationals to voters,³³ and made access to French citizenship a key stake for all inhabitants and their administration. Along with the growth of nationalist movements, the independence of many African countries between 1958 and 1962 and the creation of AUO in 1963, this status change shows that the control of the population was now linked to French sovereignty over the whole territory. In 1958, 75% of the electors of CFS voted in favour of maintaining the French presence; in 1967 again 60% of the electors refused independence, which was finally adopted in 1977 by 99,8% of the voters. Despite numerous frauds, a link with the increase of population, while not the only explanation, cannot be ignored. For the inhabitants, the possession of French citizenship by attribution (i.e. from birth³⁴) was the easiest and safest way to obtain the right to live in the territory.³⁵

³⁰ CAC 940163/79, letter from high-commissioner to ministry of DOM-TOM [Départements et Territoires d’Outre-Mer (“Overseas Departments and Territories”)], 30/3/1971.

³¹ CAC 940163/26.

³² Law n° 56-619 of June 23rd 1956, also called «Loi Defferre».

³³ Merle (Isabelle) [2004], «De la ‘législation’ de la violence en contexte colonial. Le régime de l’indigénat en question», *Politix*, vol. 17, n° 66, pp. 137-162 [www.persee.fr]; Urban (Yerri) [2011], *L’indigène dans le droit colonial français 1865-1955*, Fondation Varenne, 674 p.

³⁴ Weil (Patrick) [2002], *Qu’est-ce qu’un Français ? Histoire de la nationalité française depuis la Révolution*, Paris, Grasset, 401 p.

³⁵ I detailed this point in Imbert-Vier (Simon) [2011], *Tracer des frontières à Djibouti. Des territoires*

The leader of the anti-French sovereignty movement in 1958 being a Somali – Mahmoud Harbi, who died in 1960 – the administration decided to support an Afar leader – Ali Aref, member of the Gaullist network – in order to counter the independence movement. The goal of the population control politics became to support the presence of inhabitants considered as “Afar” instead of those viewed as “Somalis”, particularly those to whom the “Issas” identity was denied.³⁶ An endless task followed of sorting the population according to these criteria, which were being reconstructed at the same time and indeed up until independence. Two main tools were used for that purpose: birth registries and citizenship attribution.

We have to add to these considerations the fact that the population of the “indigenous areas” lived in miserable conditions. Oberlé entitled a chapter of a book he published in 1971: “A painting of poverty: Djibouti in 1966” (*Tableau d'une misère : Djibouti en 1966*).³⁷ The politico-military pressure was justified by the need for social control of most of the inhabitants to maintain a very unequal society. All in all, the social and political tensions were very high in the middle of the 1960's in this last French colony of continental Africa.

The making of the Barrage

During the 1960's, this policy led to a stronger coercion over the population, probably linked to the presence of Foreign Legion troops, who had left Algeria in 1962 where they were specifically trained for political control of civilians.³⁸ The southern frontier with Somalia was progressively militarised.³⁹ Inside the town, raids (*raffles*) became common practice. Along with massive identity controls, they were conducted by the Gendarmerie (a military police force) in the autochthonous areas, as the urban space was being clearly segregated. We don't have precise data about these raids, but we can think that already in 1955,

et des hommes aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles, Paris, Karthala, 479 p., chapter 6.

³⁶ “Afar” (called “Danakil” by outsiders up to the 1950s) and “Issas” (not always distinguished from “Somalis”) have been described by Europeans, since the end of the 19th century, as the two autochthonous and antagonist groups in the territory.

³⁷ Oberlé (Philippe), Hugot (Pierre) [1985], *Histoire de Djibouti - Des origines à la république*, Paris, Dakar, Présence Africaine, 346 p. (from Oberlé (Philippe) [1971], *Afar et Somalis - Le dossier Djibouti*, Paris, Présence Africaine).

³⁸ Letter from the defence minister, 19/3/1962 : «les effectifs de légion actuellement stationnés en Côte française des Somalis seront portés de la valeur d'une compagnie à la valeur d'un bataillon d'infanterie, sans que pour autant les effectifs des Troupes de Marine du Territoire subissent de réduction», CAC 940163/27.

³⁹ In Algeria, barriers were set up from 1956 along the Tunisian and Moroccan borders (Joly (Vincent) [2009], *Guerres d'Afrique - 130 ans de guerres coloniales, l'expérience française*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 336 p., chap. 15). In a non-colonial context, the Berlin wall was established in 1961.

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every month about 8% of the autochthonous people were targeted by these controls,⁴⁰ thereby encompassing the entire population in one year.

On August 25-26th, 1966, the President of the French Republic, General Charles de Gaulle, stopped in Djibouti on his way to Ethiopia. On this occasion, on the 25th, despite all efforts of the colonial administration, nationalist militants succeeded in displaying banners demanding independence along the road followed by the official parade. The authorities' reaction was quick and violent. The deployed security plan (*dispositif de sécurité*) officially resulted in 36 wounded in the police and 19 among the protesters. The next morning, a plan for re-establishment of order (*dispositif de rétablissement de l'ordre*) caused two deaths. In the afternoon, the Legion came to reinforce the Gendarmerie forces and the territorial militia. They dispersed a crowd estimated at 3000 persons in 45 minutes, causing officially 1 death and 46 wounded in the police, 3 deaths and 238 wounded in the population.

In the following days, a "hunting of opponents" was organised in the "indigenous town", and a curfew was established. A few thousand people were forced back (*refoulés*) to Somalia without formalities.⁴¹ When General de Gaulle came again to Djibouti on August 28th, no demonstration took place in a town under military control.

But the tension level remained high. On September 5th, the High Commissioner asked for authorisation to implement a project elaborated a few months earlier by the army: the building of "a passive obstacle around the town of Djibouti" (*un obstacle passif autour [de la] ville de Djibouti*).⁴² The authorisation was granted on the 7th, and on September 14th, after new incidents, its installation was decided upon, along with a new curfew after 7 pm and again massive combing raids (*ratissages*) in the indigenous areas in order to drive foreigners back to the border (*refouler les étrangers*).

Evolution of the Barrage

Starting on September 14th, 1966, a wired wall blocked access to the Djibouti peninsula by land, keeping only three authorised accesses: the Arta road, the Loyada road and the railway.⁴³

⁴⁰ ANOM 3F2.

⁴¹ From end of August to end of September, 2481 persons were expelled according to the DOM-TOM ministry (CAC 940163/8), 3476 according to Somalia's foreign affairs ministry (Ministère des affaires étrangères de la République somalienne [1967], *La Somalie française - Un cas colonial classique. Événements amenant le référendum du 19 mars 1967*, Mogadishu, 40 p.).

⁴² CAC 940163/8.

⁴³ "Un obstacle continu dit 'barrage extérieur' isole la presqu'île de Djibouti; cet obstacle ne peut être franchi qu'en trois points :

- route de Loyada - de 05h30 à 24h00 pour les piétons, les caravanes, et les véhicules;
- route de l'Arta, en permanence, pour piétons, les caravanes, et les véhicules;
- voie ferrée, à hauteur de l'usine des eaux, pour les convois du Chemin de Fer Franco-

At the beginning of 1967, gendarmes mobiles (military forces specialised in the maintenance of order) were sent from France (2, then 4, squadrons of 100 men each). The Barrage was partially destroyed in February 1967 by a flood which scattered mines that were left over from the beginning of the work. Several years were necessary to totally clear all the dispersed mines.

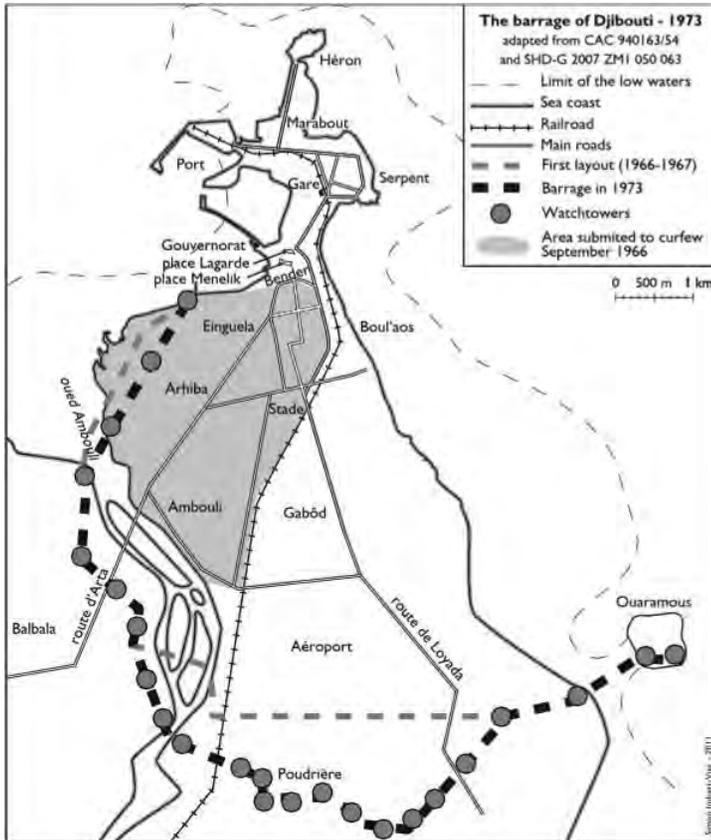


Fig. 4: Map of the Barrage, by the author

After some very violent events in March – April 1967 (at least 12 deaths on March 20th, the day after a referendum rejecting the independence by 60% of the voters, and again a few thousand evictions), the situation calmed down in May. Three squadrons were sent back to France and the dismantling of the Barrage was considered. But the decision taken at the highest level was different: on June

23rd 1967, during a “National Defence Council” meeting, General Charles de Gaulle decided that “the expulsion of Somali foreigners is to continue to be organised, the Barrage around Djibouti is to be rebuilt and reinforced” (*L’expulsion des étrangers somaliens sera poursuivie méthodiquement, le barrage autour de Djibouti sera reconstitué et renforcé*).⁴⁴ The explicitly stated objective was to stop the immigration, identified as Somalian, by two related means: the Barrage at the outside, control and eviction from the inside. At a time when the colonial era seemed to be over,⁴⁵ in Djibouti the higher French authorities chose to maintain the colonial situation by force.

Ethiopien;” (CAC 940163/79, instruction du haut-commissaire du 16/7/1970).

⁴⁴ (CAC 940163/79).

⁴⁵ Intelligence report, September 1966: “The fundamental changes which will undoubtedly happen will mark the end of direct rule. The colonial era is over” (*Les changements fondamentaux*;

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Despite the reluctance of higher military forces,⁴⁶ the Barrage was to stay, and it took on the appearance it would keep through the 1970's.⁴⁷ It was fourteen kilometres long, in the south and west of the Djibouti peninsula. At first made of simple barbed wire network and mines (then removed), later it was progressively overlooked by twenty-four watchtowers, and a track was built alongside; then a second barbed wire fence (the *prébarrage*) and a continuous line of three-meter-high fencing wire and automatic illuminating devices were added to the construction.

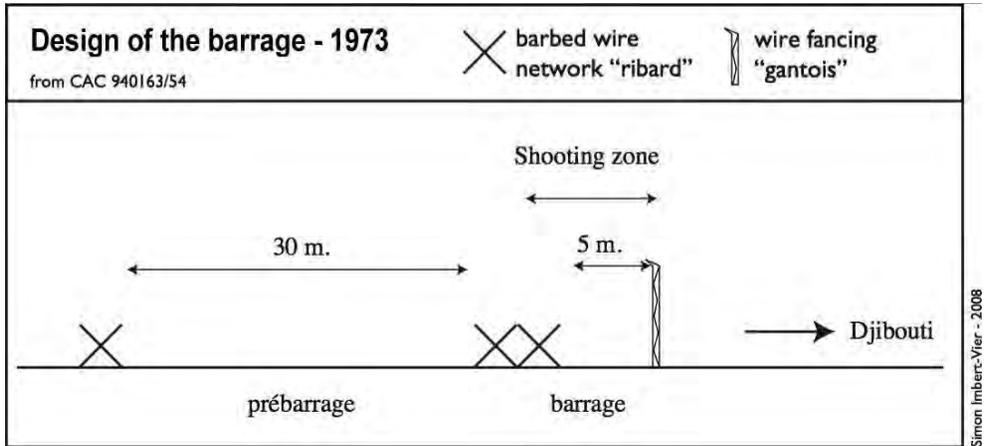


Fig. 5: Design of the Barrage, diagram by the author

The Barrage was permanently guarded by 130 to 150 soldiers (from 13^e DBLE-Demi-brigade de Légion étrangère and 57^e (becoming 5^e) RIAOM-Régiment interarmée d'outre-mer⁴⁸). They were allowed to shoot during

qui ne manqueront pas d'intervenir marqueront la fin de l'administration directe. L'ère coloniale est close (SHD-T, 40S1, report n° 9, 1966).

⁴⁶ CAC 940163/79, 30/10/1969, letter from General Tence to National Defence Minister: "J'estime que le maintien de ce barrage affecte gravement le moral de nos troupes". See also Dubois (Colette) [2002], «Jacques Foccard et Ali Aref, un mariage d'intérêt ?», *Cahiers du Centre de recherches historiques*, n° 30, octobre, pp. 35-49 [http://ccrh.revues.org/].

⁴⁷ SHD-T, 10T24, telegram from Maillote, 8/1967: "Activité compagnie génie dont matériel lourd débarque 19 août (...) principalement consacrée déminage qui sera terminé début septembre sous réserve certaines zones à reprendre suite accident survenu 20 août à Jeep Légion en patrouille qui a sauté avec dégâts seulement matériels sur mine dans zone déminée mais où début travaux piste surveillance ont mis à jour quelques mines profondément enfouies. Obstacle continu en barbelé sur les hauts et en ribard dans oued Ambouli rétabli de mer à mer par unités territoriales et accessoirement par unité génie pour rompre lassitude engendrée par seul déminage. Suite réception ses matériels lourds et faute disposer Gantois compagnie génie maintenant appliquée rétablissement piste longeant intérieur barrage, indispensable pour intercepter nombreux franchissements tentés depuis mi-août. Restera ensuite (...) : établir réseau Gantois; disposer pièges éclairants dans pré-réseau barbelés; rétablir miradors et projecteurs; (...) établir piste surveillance extérieure".

⁴⁸ [http://www.troupesdemarine.org/actuel/unites/5riaom.htm].

crossing attempts, according to rules that changed over time (i.e. to shoot at people approaching, trying to cross, who succeeded, who failed and went back, at all times, at night only, etc.). The authorised crossing points were controlled by the Gendarmerie and local militia (300 recruits).

The Barrage was supported by the French (High-Commissioner) and Djiboutian authorities (local government of Ali Aref, then Mohamed Kamil). On independence day, in June 1977, the Barrage was “suspended”. But as soon as December 1977, a series of bombings in town provided an excuse for its re-establishment. At the same time, a political crisis allowed for a redefinition of the identity criteria for *inside* and *outside*. Militants on the side of President Hassan Gouled (Somali) were integrated whereas those on the side of Prime Minister Ahmed Dini (Afar) were rejected. In general, inhabitants identified as Somalis and especially Issas were integrated, while those qualified as Afar were excluded. The Barrage was finally dismantled in 1982, as the Republic of Somalia became weaker and weaker.

The reality of the Barrage

The Barrage could only work in conjunction with intensive coercion over the population inside. Some Gendarmerie reports indicate impressive data, and even more so if we recall that according to official sources there were 118,000 inhabitants in the town in 1972. In 1974, in four months, 7587 persons were held back out of the Barrage, for an astonishing 288,166 controls in town and at the Barrage;⁴⁹ 31,078 persons were controlled between May 25th and June 19th 1975,⁵⁰ and 16,520 persons were rejected at the Barrage; in January 1976, it is said that 49,982 controls were made in Djibouti.⁵¹ Other reports⁵² provide consistent data across the years, as shown in Figures 6 & 7 below, which indicate a very strong coercion.

In March 1967, the second referendum rejecting independence was followed by a new repressive episode which resulted in a new appendix to the Barrage: the foreigners' accommodation centre (*centre d'hébergement pour étrangers*).⁵³ After the combings (*ratissages*), arrested people were jailed in La Poudrière, at the border of the Barrage. On March 23rd, about 5500 persons were locked up in this place, a thousand of them women, whilst the authorities

⁴⁹ SHD-G 2007 ZM1 051 001.

⁵⁰ CAC 940163/54.

⁵¹ CAC 940163/26.

⁵² CAC 940163/27.

⁵³ In France, in 1964, a warehouse was purchased by the administration at Arenc, in the port of Marseille, for the same use. In 1981 it became the first official «centre de rétention administrative» (Nicolas Fischer [2007], *La rétention administrative dans l'État de droit. Genèse et pratique du contrôle de l'enfermement des étrangers en instance d'éloignement dans la France contemporaine*, thèse IEP, ed. Marc Sadoun).

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were quite aware that there was no legal foundation (*fondement juridique*) for that procedure.⁵⁴ The situation became even more problematic when, on April 6th, four persons were killed while trying to escape from the camp.⁵⁵ On April 26th, a massive and clandestine eviction was organised for 2000 people (900 of them women). Somalia having announced that it would refuse to receive the deportees, they were brought by night, in groups of some hundreds, to desert areas beyond the border, to bypass the Somalian authorities' decision.⁵⁶

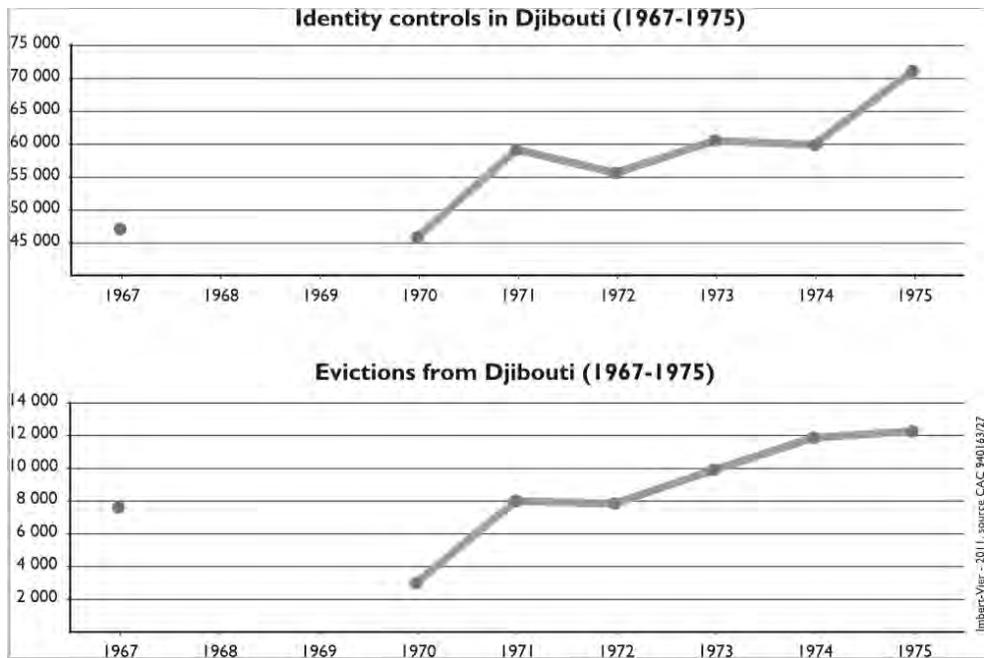


Fig. 6 & 7: Identity controls and evictions from Djibouti, graphs by the author

About the lethality of the Barrage, Djiboutian rumour tells of thousands of deaths. At the beginning of the 1970's, for instance, the legionnaires were saying in town that they killed at least one person every night.⁵⁷ Yet the available administrative documentation gives quantitatively totally incomparable data: 10 deaths before March 1968,⁵⁸ 8 deaths and 39 wounded between 1969 and 1973,⁵⁹ 5 deaths during the first quarter of 1974.⁶⁰ Even if

⁵⁴ CAC 940163/26

⁵⁵ ADN Addis Ababa B 21bis.

⁵⁶ "All have been provided with water, food and tissue" (*Tous ont reçu de l'eau, des vivres et du tissu*) (CAC 940163/26).

⁵⁷ Even at the time of independence, *Der Spiegel* (27/6/1977, p. 103) mentioned the attracting and shooting of people on the Barrage by soldiers for sport. I thank Katrin Seidel for calling my attention to this reference.

⁵⁸ CAC 940163/79, note of State Prosecutor, 24/3/1968.

⁵⁹ CAC 940163/54.

these numbers are underestimated, the report of thousands of deaths appears even more unsure. As an explanatory hypothesis we can propose that the rumour is part of the Barrage: to exaggerate its dangerousness increases its efficiency.

This hypothesis is reinforced by the fact that the military has a personal interest in lowering the real number of deaths. France being a state of law, capital crimes have to be submitted to justice; the killers being military, they are to be judged by a military Court. By consequence, “the Superior Commander General regularly gave, upon advice of the Prosecutor of the Marseille Armed Forces Court, ‘declarations of non-prosecution’”.⁶¹ A different decision would have brought before the Court those soldiers who were acting on orders, and so possibly also their superiors. This was unthinkable for all actors.



Fig. 8: Historical photo of the Barrage, collection of the author

Indeed, the legal insecurity caused by the Barrage explains the regular demands coming from high military authorities to suppress it. Outside of periods when public order is disturbed, during which the authorities can adopt measures limiting the exercise of public freedom, “once order is re-established, this measure has to stop lest it become an ‘assault’ answerable before the courts”.⁶² The Barrage had no legal existence, no legal text sanctioned it, it didn’t correspond to any administrative or national boundary, and its crossing could not be considered illegal – but it was possible to die from it.⁶³

⁶⁰ CAC 940163/54, note of /3/1974, 5 deaths: 1 by shooting, 4 “par artifice”.

⁶¹ *Le Général Commandant Supérieur a régulièrement rendu, sur avis du Commissaire du Gouvernement près le Tribunal Permanent des Forces Armées de Marseille, des ‘déclarations qu’il n’y avait lieu à poursuivre’.* (CAC 940163/79, note of 24/3/1968). Those judicial archives remain to be explored.

⁶² *L’ordre rétabli, cette mesure doit cesser sous peine de constituer une ‘voie de fait’ justiciable des tribunaux.* (CAC 940163/79, note of 20/9/1966).

⁶³ SHD-T 10T124, telegram 11/1967 : “Au cours tentative franchissement barrage Djibouti

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From November 1967, the DOM-TOM Ministry was well aware that the Barrage's "legal support is nil".⁶⁴ In 1970, when questioned to find "a legal solution to the problems posed by the Barrage",⁶⁵ the Minister of Justice confirmed that it was legally impossible to sue the "smugglers". The applicable law⁶⁶ allowed legal action only against those who helped people to get into the territory, not to those who helped people to circulate inside of it. Legally, the Barrage did not exist.



Fig. 9: Historical photo of a watchtower at the Barrage, collection of the author

From a migration border to an identity builder

The Barrage did not prevent an increase of Djibouti town's population. It was no longer an effective means to limit access to the symbolic national space and nationality; the growth rate of French citizens was higher inside than outside of it (63% against 55% between 1967 and 1975⁶⁷). And finally the territory

par huit individus 10 novembre 0h30 l'un d'eux qui avait franchi pré-barrage et se trouvant dans barrage proprement dit et ne répondant pas aux sommations a été abattu. Individu inconnu au fichier gendarmerie, n'était porteur aucune pièce identité".

⁶⁴ *Support légal et juridique est nul* (CAC 940163/79, note du 17/11/1967).

⁶⁵ *Une solution juridique aux problèmes que pose l'existence dudit barrage* (CAC 940163/79, letter from ministre des DOM-TOM to Garde des Sceaux, 15/1/1970).

⁶⁶ Décret of February 2nd 1935.

⁶⁷ 34,969 electors in 1967, 54,712 in 1975, for the whole TFAI. For the "cercle" of Djibouti, 11,069 electors in 1967, 18,041 in 1973 (Tholomier (Robert) [1977], *A Djibouti, avec les Afars et les Issas*, Cagnes-sur-mer, self-published under the pseudonym of Robert Saint-Véran, 272 p.).

became independent in spite of the Barrage. The report of this failure was regularly made by the authorities: in 1973, “illegal” entries were estimated between 7000 and 20,000 a year,⁶⁸ and the number of “clandestines” in town around 45,000.⁶⁹ This observation was most often counterbalanced by the remark that it would have been worse without the Barrage. Consequently, modifications were regularly proposed to make the Barrage “sharper” and “more efficient“, but the changes proposed only produced new failures.

So, why was such a tricky and controversial work maintained for so long, including after independence, if it didn’t meet its officially announced counter-migration objective? Possibly because its real function was not the overt one. If the Barrage was useless in preventing “foreigners” or “exogenous” people from getting into the city, it did have other effects resulting from its mere existence. The most visible one was, “at 500 meters outside of the Barrage, the constitution of a shantytown”:⁷⁰ Balbala. A transition zone, an interstitial area,⁷¹ this precarious town⁷² was regularly subject to the violence of control, raids and arbitrary destruction. It indicated the space “outside” of the Barrage, an area where all hopes were still possible, and it reminded all those who stayed “within” the Barrage both of the precariousness of their situation and of the luck to be able to take advantage of it.⁷³

In fact, we can say that the first function of the Barrage was to create and mark differences, to build heterogeneousness in a homogeneous space, and thus to contribute to the making of an identity or “ethnic” construction; it aroused the desire to get “in” and the fear of being pushed “out”. Associated with other tools, like police or administrative ones, it allowed the identity creation of foreigners versus nationals. The asymmetrical characteristics of this space and this society legitimated the political control and police coercion which created them. They ensured that colonial, and later national, authorities continued to be a necessary guarantee for “inside” order.

⁶⁸ “Bulletin de renseignement du cabinet militaire du ministère des DOM-TOM”, 28/6/1973, CAC 940163/62. Most of the clandestine entries are supposed to have been done via open accesses, especially the railway.

⁶⁹ “Note concernant le barrage de Djibouti”, bureau d’études du haut-commissariat, 14 p., 24/10/1973, CAC 940163/54.

⁷⁰ *A 500 mètres environ à l’extérieur du barrage, la constitution d’un bidonville* (SHD-G 2007 ZM1 050 063).

⁷¹ Referring to the concept of “interstitial frontier” proposed by Kopytoff [1987], *op. cit.*

⁷² Studied in Amina Saïd Chire [2008], «Sédentarisation et insertion urbaine des populations nomades en République de Djibouti», in Belbéoch (Olivier), Charbit (Yves), Souraya Hassan Housseïn, éd., *La population de Djibouti - Recherches sociodémographiques*, L’Harmattan, pp.183-229.

⁷³ A classical colonial construction, as described in Memmi (Albert) [1985], *Portrait du colonisé. Portrait du colonisateur*, Folio, Gallimard (1st ed. 1957), “*La situation coloniale fabrique des colonialistes, comme elle fabrique des colonisés*” (p. 77).

Conclusion

The Barrage of Djibouti is a boundary in the meaning we gave to that word: it is a linear space that can be drawn on a map, travelled over and crossed; it is a discontinuity-maker, changing the homogeneous space it divides into a heterogeneous one, at least in some aspects. But it is also a special international border which is not coincident with a national one and which, instead of joining territories, is trying to explicitly dissociate them by forbidding its crossing. These same migration-wall characteristics can be seen in contemporary contexts such as those in Palestine, Cyprus or at the southern border of the USA. In a French context, we can point to the situation in Mayotte (Comoros). Since it became a French *département* (administrative entity) in 2011,⁷⁴ the island is now fully independent from Comoros without cultural discontinuity, and 10% of its inhabitant are expelled every year to the others islands of the Comoro archipelago.⁷⁵ More and more restrictive physical devices are established over the sea, officially to restrain migrations. One can also think about the European Union trying to build migration walls on its southern and eastern boundaries.

All these walls, like the Barrage of Djibouti, are not efficient in forbidding migrations, an impossible task, but they do allow for differential status among populations so as to legitimate the repression against those identified as foreigners and the control and coercion deployed upon all inhabitants. They are identity builders, made up to allow unequal sharing of resources.

The global nature of the Barrage, as a material and ideological barrier, allows us to agree with Charles Tilly's suggestion that "boundaries of ethnicity, race, religion, gender, or nationality reinforce exploitation and opportunity hoarding".⁷⁶ In this case, the boundary is not a resource by itself, but a key to accessing resources.

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⁷⁴ Delberghe (Michel), «Mayotte devient le 101^e département français», *Le Monde*, 3/3/2011.

⁷⁵ Around 20,000 expelled in 2009, and 30,000 in 2010, out of 200,000 inhabitants [http://www.ccomptes.fr/fr/CC/documents/RPA/11_flux_migratoires_irreguliers_guyane_mayotte_saint_martin.pdf], last consulted on 12/12/2011.

⁷⁶ Tilly (Charles) [2003], *The Politics of Collective Violence*, Cambridge University Press, xii-276 p., p. 10. He also writes that "Category formation is itself a crucial political process. Category formation create identities. [...] Category formation occurs by means of three different mechanisms: invention, borrowing and encounter" (p. 29).

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