The Princess of No Man's Land: Bir Tawil and the Geographical Imagination

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A couple of days ago my attention was grabbed by two words – a name – broadcast over the car radio courtesy of BBC Radio 5 Live. This wasn't the name of a person, but of a place that has long interested me, and which has inspired my growing interest in contemporary No Man's Lands. It is certainly not a name one commonly hears on national radio within the UK, an absence that made its on air occurrence all the more intriguing.

The name in question is Bir Tawil (Arabic for 'tall well'); an 800 square mile trapezoid-shaped tract of land wedged in between the southern borders of the Arab Republic of Egypt and the northern border of the Republic of the Sudan.

What makes Bir Tawil so fascinating is that it is seemingly so unwanted. It is unclaimed by both of its continental neighbours and, as a consequence, appears to resist, even exceed, the processes of expansion and enclosure that are so intimately associated with the Westphalian system of modern nation states. Until now, that is. As of 16 June 2014, Bir Tawil has been claimed – although not by either Egypt or Sudan. The claimant instead is the unlikely sounding Jeremiah Heaton of Abingdon, Virginia.

Heaton, we are led to believe, is a man who would do almost anything for his seven-year-old daughter, including fulfilling a promise that she could be 'a real princess'. Eschewing the easy option of procuring a natty costume from a local royal outfitter, Heaton instead cast his geopolitical eye around the world in order to establish his own independent kingdom. He initially considered staking a claim to a portion of Antarctica until he "discovered" that sovereignty claims on the continent are suspended under the Antarctic Treaty System, agreed in 1959. The unclaimed Bir Tawil was a natural second choice. In a move discomforting for its similarity to past colonial possession-taking across Africa, Heaton travelled to Bir Tawil where, on 16 June 2014 (yes, you guessed it, his daughter's seventh birthday) he planted a self-designed flag and ushered into being the 'Kingdom of Northern Sudan'.

While this story might be fodder for the international media – as evidenced by the proliferation of stories in recent days – it might also usefully focus our attention on Bir Tawil and its curious status as variously *Terra Nulius* and /or No-man's Land. As the geographer, Alistair Bonnett, notes about Bir Tawil: "It is not just a no man's land, it is actively spurned. It appears to be the only place left on earth that is both habitable and unclaimed."

The roots of this "unclaiming" date back more than a century to the publication, in 1899 and 1902 respectively, of two maps by British colonial cartographers that created two distinct versions of the border between Egypt and what was, at the time, Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. The 1899 iteration places Bir Tawil within Sudan but incorporates the economically productive pocket of land known as the Hala'ib Triangle within Egypt. The 1902 map reversed this territorial allocation by placing Bir Tawil within Egypt and the Hala'ib Triangle within Sudan.

The effect of this cartographic flip-flopping has been that neither Egypt nor Sudan has pursued an active claim over Bir Tawil because to do so may undermine their respective national claims to the Hala'ib Triangle. Bir Tawil, as a consequence, exists as a crack between two modern nation states and, as such, is evocative of one of the earliest appearances of No-Man's Lands (*nonesmanneslond*) in the English language; from around 1320 when it was used in

reference to the barren stretches of land—often used as waste or dumping grounds—between two provinces or kingdoms. While these medieval spaces were frequently economically unproductive and therefore unwanted by feudal Lords, the story of Bir Tawil is bound up in a more complex story of sovereignty claims and strategic 'unclaiming'.

What is also striking is the way that contemporary No Man's Lands – whether Bir Tawil or the Buffer Zone in Cyprus – become sites for the imposition of certain kinds of powerful geographical imaginaries, particularly those imaginaries that seek to preserve these spaces as somehow 'out of time'. As was also made evident this week, journalists given access to the Cyprus Buffer Zone unproblematically speak of and photograph a 'land frozen in time', a place 'untouched' by recent human activity where 'nobody has been since the 1970s' – geographical fantasies that heighten the sensation of abandonment and which play on a fine balance of preservation and aesthetically-pleasing ruination.

These journalists reproduce in their words and images 'No Man's Land' as exceptional, anomalous and as a depopulated geographical curiosity, while ignoring everything that is 'normal', everyday and even mundane about the continuing human activity, whether in the form of farming, economic development, or even bi-communal village life.

Bir Tawil has become a similar kind of 'fantasy space' – "empty", "unclaimed", "the last *Terra Nullius*" and seemingly ripe for the recreation of 19th century performances of flag planting and territorial claiming – albeit, in this case, by a distinctly 21st century and homespun "paternal sovereign". What these fantastical renderings of No Man's Lands ignore is historical context, geopolitical complexity and the empirical evidence. Just as the Cyprus Buffer Zone is far from being "dead" and "devoid of life", so Bir Tawil cannot be considered either "empty" or "unclaimed".

Bir Tawil was for thousands of years, until comparatively recently, actively used by the Ababda tribe in the pursuance of their nomadic lifestyle, culture and practices. Even after 1902, the Ababda continued to transgress – or, again, *exceed* – the newly-imagined lines of colonial cartography for the seasonal grazing of livestock. Extended droughts may have forced the Ababda to move away, but as Alistair Bonnett notes, "an important part of their story remains rooted in this place." "To say that Bir Tawil is unoccupied, " he continues, "is not to say that it has no history or that it's anyones to take."

Satellite imagery reveals more contemporary evidence of occupation (albeit temporary) and movement within and through Bir Tawil. Tyre tracks point to frequent visitation – whether for the purpose of military patrols, tourism, or the transportation of goods or people. In any case, No Man's Lands are rarely empty. They are spaces that are occupied, utilized and stewarded, and layered with geographical, historical and narrative complexities.

As we approach the centennial commemorations of the 1914-18 War and the 40th anniversary of the division of Cyprus (in August 1974) over forthcoming months, discussions of No-Man's Lands are set to intensify. I only hope that these are undertaken with the kind of rigour and nuance required both to challenge and advance our understanding of these spaces.

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