

RIVALRY, ANTAGONISM AND WAR IN THE NATION- & STATE-BUILDING PROCESS: THE H FACTOR IN THE RELATIONS BETWEEN ERITREA AND ETHIOPIA

Uoldelul Chelati Dirar

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1. INTRODUCTION

The tragic outbreak of violence between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998 and the subsequent dramatic conflict that has locked the two states until 2000, and still hover over the economic and social development of the Horn of Africa, has taken journalists, political analysts, specialists of the region and the media aback.¹ The political and social developments on the aftermath of the simultaneous collapse of the Därg military regime in Ethiopia and the achievement of independence by Eritrea had nurtured high expectations of peaceful co-operation for a shared future of peace and development.² This might explain why the most recurrent words used to explain those feelings have been shock, dismay, delusion, betrayal etc. However, this

¹ Ten months after the outbreak of the conflict, those feelings of puzzlement are still clearly expressed in an article by Ian Fisher for the *New York Times*, already ten months after the outbreak of the conflict; I. Fisher, 'Wherever That Town Is, Someone Will Die for It', *New York Times* (March 14th, 1999).

² This enthusiasm and hope is caught in many of the publications which appeared in those years, see for instance: P.B. Henze, *The Horn of Africa: From War to Peace* (New York, St. Martin's Press 1991); M. Dornboos et al., eds., *Beyond Conflict in the Horn. The Prospects for Peace, Recovery and Development in Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan* (London, James Currey 1992); L. Cliffe, et al. *Beyond Conflict in the Horn* (Trenton NJ, Red Sea Press 1992) Tesfagiorgis, Gebre Hiwet, ed., *Emergent Eritrea: Challenges of Economic Development* (Trenton NJ, Red Sea 1993) Tekle, Amare, ed., *Eritrea and Ethiopia: From Conflict to Cooperation* (Lawrenceville NJ, Red Sea Press 1994).

highly unexpected and to a certain extent surprising political development has not always generated a strong desire for a deep understanding of its generating factor. On the contrary, Western analysts have often opted for a rather superficial explanation dismissing this conflict with few contemptuous statements focusing on the personal rivalry between the leaders of the two nations or on the allegedly proactive and over-assertive policy of the young Eritrean state.³ These kind of judgements could be best epitomised by the catching image of ‘two bald men fighting over a comb’ used by the *Financial Times* to describe the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia.⁴ In the intentions of the journalist this statement emphasised the futility of the conflict and, indirectly pointed out at the destitute economy of both countries. It is no coincidence that both Eritrea’s and Ethiopia’s leaders reacted angrily at this definition and called for a more complex and analytical understanding of the conflict, though offering different and, predictably contrasting interpretations.

Without undermining the relevance of contemporary political issues the recent conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia needs to be analysed also through different eyes and to this analysis chronological depth is a key prerequisite. It is my strong belief that historians can provide additional elements for an understanding of this conflict by putting it within the perspective of the long durée of historical developments. To this end it is crucial to address issues such as: land, regional systems of power, the impact of colonialism, the formation and role of political elites and the paths toward state and nation-building. It is only within this specific, yet very complex framework, that historians can contribute in shedding some light on this complex and painful event. However, to a deeper and satisfactory understanding of the specific and immediate causes of the conflict the access to official and private documents remain a key prerequisite which, unfortunately, will be met only in the years to come.

This essay is an attempt to contribute toward this analysis from a historical perspective.⁵ I will argue that, though the 1998-2000 conflict bears elements of specificity related to contemporary regional and international politics, important elements of understanding can be retrieved through a broader retrospective gaze thus focusing on the way historical elements of rivalry and antagonism have sedi-

³ On the immediate aftermath of the war a relevant exception to this attitude has been J. Abbink, ‘Briefing: The Eritrean-Ethiopian Border Dispute’, 97 *African Affairs* (Oct., 1998) pp. 551-565. Though flawed by some factual inaccuracy the article showed a clear effort to go beyond superficial interpretations and tries to provide a broader and comprehensive historical background to the tragic events of May 1998. Also to be mentioned is Ruth Iyob’s excellent analysis, cf., Ruth Iyob, ‘The Ethiopian-Eritrean Conflict: Diasporic vs. Hegemonic States in the Horn of Africa, 1991-2000’, 38 *JMAS* (2000) pp. 659-682.

⁴ M. Wrong, ‘Prickly Horn of Africa States Threaten to Fight Over Border’, *Financial Times*, 21 May 1998. Actually the author was quoting the famous Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges who talking on the Falklands war of 1982 between England and Argentina was quoted in *Time* magazine as saying ‘The Falklands thing was a fight between two bald men over a comb’ (see *Time*, 14 February 1983).

⁵ Contributions in this direction can be found in F. Guazzini, *Le ragioni di un confine coloniale: Eritrea 1898-1904* (Torino, L’Harmattan Italia 1999) which focuses in detail on the first phase of colonial boundary policies in Eritrea; Tekeste Negash and K. Tronvoll, *Brothers at War: Making Sense of the Eritrea-Ethiopia War* (Oxford, James Currey 2000); D. Jacquin-Berdal and M. Plaut, eds., *Unfinished Business: Ethiopia and Eritrea at War* (Trenton NJ, Red Sea Press 2004).

mented through time to shape the nature of present relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The main point that I will try to make is that those elements of rivalry and even antagonism should not be interpreted in mechanical terms as necessary causes for the recent conflict. They should rather be seen as successive layers of tension and uneasiness that within given geopolitical balances (or unbalances) of powers could also represent the platform for conflicting relations.

2. PRE-COLONIAL CONTEXTS: MÄRÄB MELLAŠ AS A POLITICAL REFERENCE

The literature dealing with the historical development of the notions of state and territory in Eritrea and their representations have spent a great deal of energy trying to assess the status and denomination of the present Eritrean territory before its colonisation by Italy in the second half of the 19th century.⁶ The definition of the status of this territory in the pre-colonial time, due to its implication for both Eritrean and Ethiopian nationalist narratives, has been subject to extremely divergent and controversial interpretations. The focus has been on the degree of dependence or independence of this territory from the Ethiopian polity.⁷ I will not delve too much into this aspect as it would de-rail my discourse. The two most recurrent definitions are Mədri Bahri⁸ (the land of the sea or the land toward the sea) and Märah Mällaš (the interior land which starts at the Märah or in its most known meaning, the land beyond the Märah).⁹ Märah Mällaš is definitely the toponym which has enjoyed the greatest favour thanks also to the homonymous title of Perini's book.¹⁰ However, the very adoption of those two toponyms speak volumes about dominant perceptions of land and polities. In fact both denominations and particularly Märah Mällaš reflects a geographical position which betrays the location of the observant and, therefore his/her perception of space and power relations from a perspective strongly influenced by the Ethiopian polity taken as a main reference and Təgrəñña and or Amharic languages as main medium of communication. I wonder if this representation of space and polities would equally satisfy an Afar, Təgre, Kunama,

⁶ A very detailed and exhaustive discussion of this attitude is in R. Reid, 'The Trans-Mereb Experience: Perceptions of the Historical Relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia', 1 *JEAS* (2007) pp. 238-255. In this article the author reconstructs and analyses brilliantly the main discourses developed through history on the relations between the various peoples living on the two sides of the Märah and also shows the recurrent ambiguities in the conceptualisation and perception of identities in the region.

⁷ Significant examples of this debate are: Getchew Haile, 'The Unity and Territorial Integrity of Ethiopia', 24 *JMAS* (1986) pp. 465-482; A. Triulzi, 'Competing Views of National Identity in Ethiopia', in I.M. Lewis, ed., *Nationalism and Self-determination in the Horn of Africa* (London, 1983) p. 111; Yohannes Okbazghi, 'The Eritrean Question: A Colonial Case?', 25 *JMAS* (1987) pp. 643-668; Mesfin Araya, 'The Eritrean Question: An Alternative Explanation', 28 *JMAS* (1990) pp. 79-100; J. Sorenson, 'Discourses on Eritrean Nationalism and Identity', 29 *JMAS* (1991) pp. 300-317; Ruth Iyob, 'Regional Hegemony: Domination and Resistance in the Horn of Africa', 31 *JMAS* (1993) pp. 257-276.

⁸ T. Killion, *Historical Dictionary of Eritrea* (London, Scarecrow Press 1998) p. 308.

⁹ Killion, op. cit. n. 8 at p. 299.

¹⁰ R. Perini, *Di qua dal Mareb. Mareb Mellasc* (Firenze, Tipografia cooperativa 1905)

Nara or Beni Amer speaker. Would it accommodate his/her perception of spatial and political hierarchies?

It seems to me that dominant narratives on Eritrea and on Eritrean-Ethiopian relations implicitly assume Eritrean Təgrəñña-speaking highlanders as their main object and by so doing tend to fall in the common mistake of confusing the part for the whole. Until now historiographic analyses of pre-colonial balances of power in the region have failed in taking into adequate consideration narratives from the Western lowlands and, to a certain extent, also those from the Eastern lowlands of what is today the State of Eritrea. They have remained marginal both in colonial and post-colonial literature.

Within this perspective a first crucial step to be taken in order to draft a fair and inclusive history of the region implies the analysis of the nature and articulations of relations between the different communities that inhabited the region presently divided between Eritrea and Ethiopia. By virtue of their recurrence and relevance two major themes come here to the foreground: the first is land and the second is power. With regard to social and economic relationships between communities on the two banks of the Mārāb river, land emerges as a main source of rivalry and often antagonism. As analysed by Irma Taddia in her many detailed studies on this issue¹¹ land has been one of the dominant themes in the political and social history of Eritrea. The control of the land and the definition of regulatory systems governing the access to it have been the main concern of local authorities on both sides of the Mārāb and it is on this issue that relations of power and hierarchy have been built through time. Within this context land could be defined as a persisting factor for rivalry and often antagonism among highland polities. Since the 18th century, differences in the way land tenure systems were defined and access to the land regulated could be found at the core of conflicts between Tigrean and Eritrean highland nobility. Extensive evidence of this tendency can be found in the impressive collection of oral tradition gathered by the Swedish scholar Johannes Kolmodin at the beginning of the 20th century.¹² Kolmodin's papers show clearly how through the whole 18th and 19th centuries the nobility of present Eritrean highlands has repeatedly tried to assert its independence and at some points has even attempted to extend its political leadership over the Gondarine court. This trend is supported also by the materials collected by the Italian administrator and amateur scholar Ruffillo Perini in his book *Di qual dal Mareb. Mareb Mellasc* to whom great part of the historiographic favour of the notion of Mārāb Mällaš might be attributed.¹³ What is interesting in Perini's reconstruction of pre-colonial balances of power in the re-

¹¹ I. Taddia, 'In Search of an Identity: Amhara/Tigrean Relations in the Late 19th Century', in Bahru Zewde, R. Pankhurst and Tadesse Beyene, eds., *Proceedings of the XI International Congress of Ethiopian Studies* (Addis Ababa, University Press 1994) p. 265; 'The Politics of the Northern Border: State Control and the Land Tenure System in 19th Century Ethiopia', in D. Crummey, ed., *Land, Literacy and the State in Sudanic Africa* (Trenton NJ, Red Sea Press 2004) p. 189.

¹² J. Kolmodin, 'Traditions de Tsazzege et Hazzega', in *5 Archives d'Études Orientales* (1914) pp. 1-112, V, 2 (1916) pp. 1-260.

¹³ Perini, op. cit. n. 10, at pp. 40-42.

gion is his complex and not always intelligible reading of the two notions of Mədri Bahri and Mārāb Mällaš. In fact, Perini, after having traced back the origin of the two denominations makes clear that the first one originated in a complex political process centered on the control of the coastal region. He defines it as inclusive of both the highlands (kābässa) and the lowlands of present days Eritrea and he states that this polity enjoyed a degree of relative independence throughout times.¹⁴ The Mārāb Mällaš in Perini's definition is rather a residual derivate of the older more prestigious Mədri Bahri and would include only the highlands of present Eritrea.¹⁵

Having said that it is apparent that there is a close relation between social conflicts related to the land and the struggle for political power, and to this regard the role played by the Orthodox church has also to be taken into account. In fact, in Eritrean highlands the different land tenure systems implemented by the local communities used to find their upper regulatory level in the *gulti* and in the *rim* lands belonging respectively, at least from a nominal point of view, to the secular and religious domain.¹⁶ Without venturing into detailed analysis of the complex mechanisms which regulated land tenure systems and the role of the church in it, I would like to mention an aspect which I deem relevant to this discussion. The role of the Church within this framework was not only limited to its being one of the major economic and social actors. In fact the Church also provided crucial notions of cultural and social identity rooted in a representation of Christianity defined both as a religious and a socio-economic normative set.¹⁷ Often, within the highlands' socio-economic systems, Christianity, rural economy and land systems tended to be different sides of the same coin.¹⁸

An additional element to be taken into account, from the second half of the 19th century is the Ethiopian attempt to build a modern and relatively centralised state which implied an expansionist process toward both the southern and northern marches of the Abyssinian Empire. To this regard the policy implemented by Emperor Yohannəs IV has been crucial. He tried to dilute trans-Mārāb rivalries and antagonisms through a complex policy of economic end social integration aimed at blending differences through marriages and military occupation. As discussed in depth by Irma Taddia¹⁹ marriage policies aimed at breaking the obstacles posed by customary laws to foreigner's claim to the land. Military control of the territory, under the leadership of *ras* Alula, aimed at pacifying an ebullient territory and strengthen Yohannəs IV imperial ambition vis-à-vis analogous and conflicting

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 25-34.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 36-38.

¹⁶ On this subject relevant contributions can be found in A. Bausi, G. Dore and I. Taddia, eds., *Materiale antropologico e storico sul rim in Etiopia ed Eritrea* (Torino, L'Harmattan Italia 2001).

¹⁷ A significant and extensive contribution to this theme can be found in Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1972) and in S. Kaplan, *The Monastic Holy Man and the Christianization of Early Solomonic Ethiopia* (Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner 1984).

¹⁸ R. Caulk, 'Religion and the State in Nineteenth Century Ethiopia', 10 *JES* (1972) p. 23.

¹⁹ I. Taddia, 'The Politics of the Northern Border: State Control and the Land Tenure System in 19th Century Ethiopia', in D. Crummey, ed., *Land, Literacy and the State in Sudanic Africa*. (Trenton NJ, Red Sea Press 2004) pp. 189-212.

ambitions arising from the Egyptian side first and from the Italian side later. It is in those years that the issue of Ethiopia's access to the sea emerges as a crucial theme, which was to have a central role in future Eritreo-Ethiopian relations. Access to the sea has been a recurrent theme in subsequent Abyssinian polities since the 18th century²⁰ but it is only in the 19th century, under emperor Yohannēs IV that the issue of direct control of the coastal region emerges as a clear and specific political priority. The main reason to explain this stand is to be found in the need for the Ethiopian ruler to have a sure and continue control of one of the major gateways for weapons supply without which his expansionist and hegemonic ambitions would have been hopeless. To this regard it must be recalled that the weapons left by General Napier to Yohannēs IV after the famous punitive expedition against emperor Tāwodros II together with the exposure to modern military techniques had played a significant role in modifying regional balances of power. It therefore had given a sudden push to the political ambitions of Yohannēs IV.²¹

To conclude with the issue of regional rivalries and antagonism in pre-colonial times it has to be stressed that the complex network of often conflicting polities on the highlands at both sides of the Mārāb had their main socio-economic markers in agriculture (as the dominant economic model) and Christianity (as the dominant cultural and social model). In this context rivalry and antagonism, frequently did take place within a framework of shared social and cultural values and focused mainly on the issue of conflicting access to productive resources, namely the land. Markedly different was the reality for other populations which did not belong to the same cluster of Semitic languages and to the same Christian-agricultural background who experienced much harsher and more violent relationships .

The history of the 19th century witnessed these tense relations which were made most manifest in armed raids. These were periodically unleashed by the Abyssinians as well as by the Egyptians,²² and occasionally also from the Eritrean highlands.²³ As pointed out with extensive documentary evidence by Richard Caulk, raids, banditry, and inter-communal violence – particularly cattle rustling – have deeply marked the social and political history of the region throughout the

²⁰ This issue has been discussed extensively in F.A. Dombrowski, *Ethiopia's Access to the Sea* (Leiden, Brill 1985).

²¹ Zewde Gabre-Sellase, *Yohannes IV of Ethiopia. A political Biography* (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1975); on this episode and on the impact of British handouts, Caulk has a slightly more conservative assessment, see R.A. Caulk, 'Firearms and Princely Power in Ethiopia in the Nineteenth Century', 13 *Journal of African History* (1972) pp. 609-630. For more general references see also R. Pankhurst, 'Fire-Arms in Ethiopian History (1800-1935)', 6 *Ethiopia Observer* (1962) pp. 135-80 and, of the same author 'The History of Fire-Arms in Ethiopia prior to the Nineteenth Century', 11 *Ethiopia Observer* (1976) pp. 202-25 and 'Guns in Ethiopia', 20 *Transition* (1965) pp. 26-33.

²² H. Erlich, *Ethiopia and Eritrea During the Scramble for Africa: A Political Biography of Ras Alula (1875-1897)* (East Lansing, East Lansing African Studies 1982) pp. 101-106; G.H. Talhami, *Suakin and Massawa under Egyptian Rule, 1865-1885* (Washington, University Press of America 1979); Adhana Mengsteb, 'The Occupation of Keren by the Egyptians, 4 July 1872-10 April 1885', in R. Pankhurst, Ahmed Zekaria and Taddese Beyene, eds., *Proceedings of the First National Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Addis Ababa, IES 1990).

²³ F. Martini, *Diario Eritreo* (Firenze, Vallecchi 1942) Vol. II, p. 322.

whole 19th century.²⁴ Colonial archives provide ample evidence of the survival of these practices as raids continued to be unleashed long after the establishment of the colony of Eritrea. These were a source of tension between the Italian colonial administration and the Ethiopian state.²⁵ During those raids, beside cattle rustling, it was common practice to maim and kill adult males, rape women and, together with boys, take them into slavery. Oral and written sources report vividly of raids led by *ras* Wubie against the Kunama and Nara²⁶ and Bilen²⁷ people in the 19th century. Moreover, colonial sources reports of raids from the Enderta region in Təgray against Afar communities in the Danakil region as well as from Addi Abo against the Kunama²⁸ as late as the 1930s. It seems to me that this difference in relations and also in the way rivalry and antagonism were handled reflects a perception of territory and politics which was not inclusive of all cultural and social differences that inhabited the region. Rather it tended to set a hierarchical system of values which determined the degree of inclusion according to religious, ethnic, and even socio-economic backgrounds.²⁹

3. ITALIAN COLONIALISM AS A WATERSHED

Within this complex set of relations colonialism represented a crucial watershed insofar as it made possible a series of local alliances based on the traditional colonial principle of *divide et impera*. In fact the early Italian colonial administration devised successful policies of social and political manipulation focusing on ethnicity, religion and social stratification.³⁰ Ethnicity was a crucial political issue because historically oppressed minorities, due to their enjoyment of larger freedom

²⁴ R.A. Caulk, 'Bad Men of the Borders: Shum and Shefta in Northern Ethiopia in the 19th Century', 17 *IJAHS* (1984) pp. 201-227.

²⁵ With regard to the early period it is worth noting a letter written by Emperor Menelik to *dägazmač* Täfäri in which the Emperor mentions that raids had been led against the Omartu people in Eritrean territory, and ordered the return of looted property: *Menelik to dägazmač Täfäri*, [letter], 27 September 1901, in Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Rome), Carte Martini, Scatola 17, Fascicolo 60. Similar episodes were reported over the ensuing years.

²⁶ A. Pollera, *I baria e i cunama*. (Roma, Reale Società Geografica Italiana 1913) pp. 33-53; A. Naty, 'Memories of the Kunama of Eritrea towards Italian Colonialism', 56 *Africa* (2001) pp. 573-589.

²⁷ See Michael Gaber, *Bogos, 1890-1941* (Baghdad, 1992).

²⁸ G. Corni, *Tra Gasc e Setit. Note di viaggio* (Roma, SIAG 1929) pp. 48, 52, 62.

²⁹ This complex set of power relations should not be understood as something fixed and unchangeable. On the contrary: social, ethnic and even religious relations were much more fluid and articulate than one would expect. Emblematic in this sense is the case of the famous Eritrean chief Bahta Hagos, who in 1894 led a strong rebellion against the Italians. Before the arrival of the Italians Bahta Hagos had to run away from his village because he had killed the son of a leading Tigrean aristocrat and on the basis of ancient and still acknowledged kinship relations had sought refuge among the Habab, a different ethnic group faraway from his region and of Islamic faith. See G. Puglisi, *Chi è dell'Eritrea* (Asmara, Tipografia Regina 1953) p. 30.

³⁰ Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, 'Colonialism and the Construction of National Identities: The Case of Eritrea', 1 *JEAS* (2007) pp. 256-276; A. Pollera, *L'Italia e le popolazioni dell'eritrea. Conseguenze sociali, morali ed economiche che la colonizzazione italiana in eritrea ha avuto nella Evoluzione delle popolazioni locali e delle regioni finitime* (Napoli, SIEM 1935) p. 54.

and opportunities under colonial rule, provided the Italian colonial administration with support.³¹ Religion was another important element in the Italian colonial strategy.³² In a traditionally multi-ethnic and multicultural society, religious identities, in the context of economic and political crisis, were easily transformed into factors of conflict. They acted as both catalyst and outlet for tensions stemming from the competition for access to limited natural resources. In this context it was relatively easy for the Italians to present themselves as an administration *super partes*. At the same time they tried to gain a special consensus from marginal communities, often penalised by a system that tended to privilege Christian populations.³³ Crucial to this strategy has been the Italian policy of the so-called *indifferenza in materia di culto* (dispassionate attitude in religious matters) developed in the early years of colonial rule. This policy stated the neutral and equidistant attitude of the colonial authority *vis-à-vis* the religions practiced in the colony, but in practice tended to favour traditionally marginalised religions, particularly Islam.³⁴

Another crucial aspect of Italian colonial strategies in Eritrea is to be found in their intervention on social stratifications existing in the Eritrean society. These interventions were characterised by strict and unequal power relations that kept subaltern groups in a position of subjugation. For instance, rural communities in the highlands were burdened with heavy taxation,³⁵ frequent demands for free manpower and the responsibility for feeding and supporting the army.³⁶ Similarly, amongst the predominantly pastoralist societies of the western lowlands, existed a rigid and hierarchical subdivision of the society, such as the one between *Nabtab* and *Tagre*, in which the former were a cattle-owning aristocracy and the latter the servile labour force over which the patron had absolute rights. The rigid separa-

³¹ Naty, loc. cit. n. 26, at p. 580; D. Lussier, 'Local Prohibitions, Memory and Political Judgement among the Kunama: an Eritrean Case Study', in K. Fukui et al., eds., *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective. Papers from the XIIIth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Kyoto, University Press 1997) p. 441; G. Dore, 'Amministrare l'esotico. Un caso di etnologia applicata nell'Africa Orientale Italiana, 1936-1941', 109 *Quaderni storici* (2002) pp. 189-220.

³² For an interesting summary of Italian colonial theory with regard to religion, see C. Rossetti, 'Razze e religioni nei territori dell'Impero', in T. Sillani, ed., *L'Impero, AOI* (Roma, La Rassegna italiana 1937) p. 73.

³³ M. Romandini, 'Politica musulmana in Eritrea durante il governatorato Martini', 3 *Islâm, storia e civiltà* (1984) pp. 127-131.

³⁴ In fact, this policy was by its very definition bound to subvert a religious balance based on unequal relations of power, C. Marongiu Buonaiuti *Politica e religioni nel colonialismo italiano, 1882-1941* (Milano, Giuffrè 1982) p. 33 and Uodelul Chelati Dirar, 'Church-state relations in colonial Eritrea: missionaries and the development of colonial strategies (1869-1911)' 8 *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* (2003) pp. 401-420.

³⁵ R. Pankhurst, 'Tribute, Taxation and Government Revenues in Nineteenth Century and Early Twentieth Century Ethiopia, part I', 5 *JES* (1967) pp. 37-88; R. Pankhurst, 'Tribute, Taxation and Government Revenues in Nineteenth Century and Early Twentieth Century Ethiopia, Part II', 6 *JES* (1968) pp. 21-72; R. Pankhurst, 'A Historical Examination of Ethiopian Tax Revenues from the Northern Provinces (the Land of the Bahr Nagash/Marab-mellash and Bogos) in Pre-colonial Times', 2 *Ethiopian Journal of African Studies* (1981) pp. 7-39.

³⁶ R.A. Caulk, 'Armies as Predators: Soldiers and Peasants in Ethiopia c. 1850-1935', 11 *IJAHS* (1978) pp. 457-493.

tion between the two groups was further enforced with the strict prohibition of intermarriage.³⁷ However, within this pattern of power relations, serfs had the right of animal ownership and thus were able to increase their wealth in livestock. As pointed out by Jordan Gebre-Medhin, a key role in changing social relations and the balance of power within pastoralist and semi-pastoralist communities was played by the 'the introduction of modern and scientific techniques of livestock breeding and health care.'³⁸ In the long term, this enabled the Tigre to increase their wealth to the point at which the traditional social division within the community became unsustainable and so began growing pressures for social emancipation. The overall impact of Italian colonialism on Eritrean social stratification has still to be fully assessed. However, it is apparent that the so-called *politica indigena* (indigenous policy) over the long term introduced structural modifications within Eritrean society. Among them has to be mentioned the progressive transformation of local authorities into salaried chiefs, appointed by the colonial authority and thus strongly dependent on colonial power both for their survival and for their political legitimacy.³⁹

These transformations together with the relatively more liberal taxation system imposed by the Italians,⁴⁰ and the temporary relief from forced labour and other similar obligations, helped the Italian administration to gain the useful apathy of many segments of the Eritrean society. This facilitated the consolidation of colonial rule. However, in order not to present a misleading idyllic image of Italian colonialism it has to be mentioned that after the early years when territorial acquisitions were obtained mainly through negotiation and the disbursement of money,⁴¹ policies aimed at strengthening colonial rule over Eritrea included the ruthless suppression of whatever form of opposition. Thus, between 1890 and 1897, an entire generation of local leaders disappeared in the detention camps established by the colonial administration on the island of Nokhra, in the town of Assäb on the Red Sea, and even in Italy,⁴² or they were forced into exile in neighbouring territories.⁴³ It is worth mentioning that in those years crossing the Märäb river was the main option left to the majority of Eritreans particularly the educated that were suffocated by repressive and discriminatory colonial policies and thus

³⁷ S.F. Nadel, 'Notes on Beni-Amer Society', *26 Sudan Notes and Records* (1945).

³⁸ Jordan Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea* (Trenton NJ, Red Sea Press 1989) p. 64.

³⁹ I. Taddia, 'Constructing Colonial Power and Political Collaboration in Italian Eritrea', in M. Page, ed., *Personality and Political Culture* (Boston, Boston University Press 1998) p. 23.

⁴⁰ Perini, op. cit. n. 10, at p. 38.

⁴¹ C. Cesari, *Colonie e possedimenti coloniali. Cenni storici, geografici ed economici* (Roma, Tipografia Regionale 1930) pp. 39-44.

⁴² M. Lenci, *All'inferno e ritorno. Storie di deportati tra Italia e Eritrea in epoca coloniale* (Pisa, BFS Edizioni 2004).

⁴³ For a detailed study of Italian repressive policies in Eritrea and of the resistance movements that they sparked, see Tekeste Negash, *No Medicine for the Bite of a White Snake: Notes on Nationalism and Resistance in Eritrea 1890-1940* (Uppsala, Uppsala University 1986); see also Zemehret Yohannes, *Mäkhätä antsar Italyawi megza 'ti ab Ertra* (Asmara 1991).

nurtured strong anti-colonial feelings.⁴⁴ Many of those people found receptive and gratifying hospitality at Haile Sellase court in Addis Ababa.⁴⁵ Alternative options, particularly for Muslim Eritreans were Sudan, Egypt or the Middle East.⁴⁶

With regard to trans-boundary policies Italian colonial rule played a major role in solidifying administrative and territorial identities within the newly established polity. This complex and long lasting process followed two main trajectories. On one side within the Eritrean territory, the increased administrative and economic homogenisation of the colonial territory made people's and goods' mobility easier. It thus facilitated a process which saw the blending of regional parochialism and ethnic tensions into a skeleton of second class statehood within which Eritreans, though in a position of subordination and marked discrimination, still enjoyed a period of relative economic prosperity and stability.

On the other side with regard to trans-Märäb relations, after the shock of Adwa where Italian expansionist ambitions were crushed by the army of Emperor Mənelək II, Italian administrations inaugurated a season of careful *real politik* toward Ethiopia.⁴⁷ The guidelines of this strategy can be broadly summarised in the following main points. In a larger diplomatic perspective Italy followed a policy of 'good neighbourliness' with the Ethiopian central government. This was functional to avoiding further conflicts, to appease the traumatised public opinion in Italy and also to open up Ethiopian markets for Italian goods.⁴⁸ However, at the local level Italian diplomacy in Eritrea aimed at developing closer relations with local authorities of the neighbouring region of Təgray. This complex and up to now, little analysed policy developed into a highly selective identification of power and kinship relations between families of the two sides of the border. The Italian authorities, when selecting individuals to be appointed as local authorities in the colonial administration, very carefully considered not only their 'loyalty' and dependability but also their connections with trans-border families. The aim of this was to build

⁴⁴ Alazar Tesfamichel, *Eritrea Today, Fascist Oppression under Nose of British Military* (Woodford, New Times Book Department 1941) this pamphlet though written on the eve of the BMA and from a pan-Ethiopian perspective, conveys many of the anticolonial and nationalist feelings common among Eritrean and Ethiopian educated elites in those years.

⁴⁵ This is the case of Lorenzo Ta'əzaz and Efräm Täwäldämähən just to mention some of them. The first one was given many relevant positions within the Imperial administration as he was appointed Ethiopia's Permanent Delegate to the League of Nations in 1936 and Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1941, President of the Chamber of Deputies in 1943, and Delegate to the Paris Peace Conference on May 1946. Efräm Täwäldämähən served as Ethiopian Ambassador in several European countries.

⁴⁶ J. Miran, 'Grand mufti, erudite et nationaliste érythréen. Note sur la vie et l'oeuvre de cheikh Ibrāhīm al-Mukhtār (1909-1969)', 10 *Chroniques Yemenites* (2002) available on line at: <<http://cy.revues.org/document126.html>> see also for more general references Abdisalam Yassin Mohammed, 'Early Muslim Education and its Role in Northeast Africa', 1/2 *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* (1979-1980) pp. 125-131.

⁴⁷ A. Malvezzi, 'Italian Colonies and Colonial Policy', 6 *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Relations* (1927) pp. 233-245.

⁴⁸ R. Pankhurst, 'The Trade of Northern Ethiopia in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', 2 *JES* (1964) 49-159; P. Garretson, 'Frontier Feudalism in Northwest Ethiopia: Shaykh al-Imam "Abd Allah of Nuqara", 1901-1923', 15 *JAHs* (1982) pp. 261-282.

a web of indigenous authorities who would be able to mediate with authorities beyond the border and possibly to bring them into the Italian sphere of influence.⁴⁹

To some extent Italian colonial rule in Eritrea managed to mitigate traditional rivalries among some sections of Eritrean and Tigrean society both through its *Politica indigena* and through its capacity of attracting labour from neighbouring Ethiopia into the Eritrean market. In fact, in an environmentally and economically destitute regional landscape, colonial Eritrea started attracting migrant male labour since the very beginning of Italian colonial rule.⁵⁰ This trend significantly surged with the massive enrollment of Eritrean males in the military (*ascari*) as migrant labour was now expected to fill the wide gaps opened up in the agricultural and building sectors.⁵¹ Colonial rule also paved the way for future antagonisms and rivalries that were to emerge in all their virulence after the sudden end of Italian colonial rule in 1941. In fact, the very action of drafting boundaries on paper also implied implanting those boundaries in the minds of the Eritreans and – by way of rejection – in the mind of the Ethiopians.⁵² In fact, as I will argue in the next section of this paper a great part of Eritrean nationalist discourses rooted their claims on the very notion of colonial boundaries and their inviolability, as sanctioned officially by the OAU Charter. However, from a deconstructive perspective, also pan-Ethiopian discourses had to refer to colonial narrative on statehood and boundaries.

A further element in the complex history of rivalry and antagonisms in the region can also be traced back to the particular political developments that followed the fascist invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. On June 1st 1936, just few weeks after the conquest of Addis Abäba, a royal decree established the new colonial territories into the so-called Impero dell’Africa Orientale Italiana (AOI) that was partitioned into five major administrative units, roughly drafted along ethnic lines.⁵³ In this new administrative organisation Eritrea came to include the whole Təgray and part of Wällo a development that would have some political consequences in the

⁴⁹ Taddia, loc. cit. n. 39, at p. 30.

⁵⁰ R. Pankhurst, with D. H. Johnson, ‘The Great Drought and Famine of 1888-92 in Northeast Africa’, in D. Johnson and D. Anderson, eds., *The Ecology of Survival: Case Studies from Northeast African History* (London, Lester Crook Academic Publishing 1988) p. 47. Vivid reports on the impact of the famine on civilians and the migration it caused can be found in F. Martini, *Nell’Africa italiana* (Milano, Treves 1895) pp. 38-40.

⁵¹ Yemane Mesghenna, ‘Economic Boom on the Eritrean Labor Market’, *58 Africa* (2003) pp. 89-114; Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882-1941* (Uppsala, Carl Göran Andræ and Rolf Torstendahl 1987) p. 50.

⁵² F. Guazzini, ‘Storie di frontiera. Percezioni identitarie della frontiera coloniale tra Etiopia e Eritrea, 1897-1908’, *37 Quaderni Storici* (2002) pp. 221-258; F. Le Houérou, ‘Les Frontières physiques et symboliques de l’Érythrée: l’impact colonial italien’, in C. Dubois, M. Michel and P. Soumile, eds., *Frontières plurielles. Frontières conflictuelles en Afrique subsaharienne: Actes du colloque «Etats et Frontières en Afrique subsaharienne» Organisé par l’Institut d’Histoire Comparée des Civilisations, Aix-en-Provence 7 au 9 mai 1998* (Paris, l’Harmattan 2000) p. 303.

⁵³ T. Sillani, ‘Organizzazione e attrezzatura dell’Impero’, in T. Sillani, ed., *L’Impero, AOI* (Roma, La Rassegna italiana 1937) p. 185.

post-colonial political balances.⁵⁴ On the Ethiopian side the invasion launched by Mussolini had two main consequences. On the one side it brought about a strong nationalist resistance among important sections of the Amhara and Tigrean elites which played a major role in making the Italian rule over Ethiopia shaky and, eventually, in bringing down Italian colonial rule in the Horn.⁵⁵ On the other side the Italian occupation nurtured a discourse which would have great success in Ethiopian nationalist narratives in the years to come: a call to restore the alleged pre-colonial unity between Eritrea and the ‘motherland’ Ethiopia.⁵⁶ This theme, which has emerged already in Haile Sellase policies in the early 1930s will assume much more relevance and deep political implications in the aftermath of the collapse of Italian rule over the region.

4. REHEARSAL OF DEMOCRACY AND NATIONALISM: THE BRITISH MILITARY ADMINISTRATION

The decade that followed the collapse of the Africa Orientale Italiana in the summer of 1941 inaugurated for both Eritrea and Ethiopia a thrilling season of change, challenges and debate for both Eritrea and Ethiopia. On the Eritrean side the sudden and unexpected dissolving of colonial authoritarian rule unleashed a long repressed need for political and social visibility of the Eritrean elites.⁵⁷ Though Italian rule left Eritrea with an extremely poor educational system⁵⁸ and with very few edu-

⁵⁴ The deliberate project of reconfiguring this landscape along ethnic lines is clearly expressed by colonial sources that define the creation of this greater Eritrea as the return of ‘Eritrea to its natural geographical and ethnic boundaries’ (‘tornando così all’Eritrea il suo naturale confine geografico ed etnico’), T. Sillani, ‘Capisaldi della legislazione per l’Impero’, in T. Sillani, ed., *L’Impero, AOI* (Roma, La Rassegna italiana 1937) p. 175.

⁵⁵ Salome Gabre Egziabher, ‘The Ethiopian Patriots, 1936-1941’, 12 *Ethiopia Observer* (1967) pp. 63-91; Sayfu Abba Wallo, *Yä Tarik qars 1928 amätä mährät yä däbub Ityopya yä Sidamo torännät* (Addis Ababa 1961); R. Pankhurst, ‘The Ethiopian Patriots and the Collapse of Italian Rule in East Africa’, 12 *Ethiopia Observer* (1967) pp. 92-127; Id., *La resistenza dei patrioti etiopici (1936-’41)*, 9-10 *Materiali di Lavoro: Rivista di studi storici* (1991) pp. 143-64; Id. ‘Resistance to Italian Colonialism: The Case of the Ethiopian Patriots 1936-1941’, in *Fonti e problemi della politica coloniale italiana: atti del convegno, Taormina-Messina, 23-29 ottobre 1989*, Vol. 2 (Roma, Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali 1996) p. 735.

⁵⁶ Salome Gabre Egziabher, loc. cit. n. 55; this approach has been supported also by relevant academic contributions from western scholars such as E. Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians: An Introduction to Country and People* (London, Oxford University Press 1960); D. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1974) and S. Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (London, Heinemann Educational 1976) and also by eminent political activists and pamphleteers that supported the Ethiopian view such as E. Sylvia Pankhurst, *Eritrea on the Eve* (Essex, 1952).

⁵⁷ Though from different and rather contrasting perspectives the vibrant atmosphere of those years is caught vividly in both Tekeste Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia the Federal Experience* (Uppsala, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet 1997) and Alemseged Tesfai, *Aynäfälälä* [Let us not be divided] (Asmara, Hedri Publishers 2002).

⁵⁸ R. Pankhurst, ‘The Foundations of Education, Printing, Newspapers, Book Production, Libraries and Literacy in Ethiopia’, 6 *Ethiopia Observer* (1962) pp. 241-290; Id. ‘Education in Ethiopia during the Italian Fascist Occupation (1936-1941)’, 5 *JJAHS* (1972) pp. 361-396; Tekeste Negash 1987, op. cit. n. 51.

cated individuals, the decade between the end of colonial rule and the introduction of the Federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1952 was a unique and exciting period of openness and vigorous debate nevertheless. For the first time it was possible for Eritreans to express themselves freely on sundry aspects of social, economic and cultural life. The vibrant and exciting atmosphere of those years is best represented by the debate that animated *Sämunawi gazeta* (*Eritrean Weekly News*) a weekly magazine published under the auspices of the BMA.⁵⁹

This aspect of openness and lively debate during the decade under the BMA was crucial also as it witnessed the materialisation of some themes that will emerge throughout the successive controversial history of Eritrean and Ethiopian relations. In this period elements of rivalry, that were to a certain extent inherited by colonial policies, often escalated in open antagonism paving the way to various forms of warfare. For the sake of this paper I will focus on three main issues which were to play a role in the way nationalist narratives were developed in Eritrea.

The first issue to be discussed is the labour market. As mentioned earlier Italian colonial rule over Eritrea opened up new economic perspectives and offered employment opportunities that went beyond the capacity of the local labour market. To this regard a central role in the permanent scarcity of labour which affected the Eritrean economy was played by the recruitment of Eritreans into the colonial army.⁶⁰ The recruitment of Eritrean *ascari* left both the agricultural and the urban labour market seriously understaffed frequently raising serious concerns among colonial administrators.⁶¹ The main response to this phenomenon has been the massive migration of labour forces from Təgray and to a minor extent from the Sudan, and Yemen as well as from other Ethiopian regions. Within a predominantly rural economy traditionally greedy for cultivable land, migrant labour mainly composed of Tigrean immigrants, could be absorbed only inasmuch as the Colonial economy and the subsequent war economy which flourished between 1941 and 1945, managed to absorb Eritrean labour. The crisis at the end of World War II and the sudden loss of strategic relevance of Eritrea as a hub for the Allied war efforts brought down the Eritrean economy and caused massive unemployment.⁶² Within this context of social and economic crisis many former *ascari* returned to their original homeland, defeated and jobless. They occasionally clashed with Tigrean immigrants who in the meantime had settled in those lands as tenants or labourers. Urban spaces where immigrants from Ethiopia and particularly from Təgray had settled since the 1920s were another ground for conflict.⁶³ In the new crisis situa-

⁵⁹ An interesting selection of the articles written by Woldeab Woldemariam the editor of the Təgrəñña edition of the magazine are collected in Tekwabo Aresese', ed., *Merutsat 'anqetsat ato Weldeab, 1941-1991* [Selected articles of Mister WoldeAb] (Asmara, Hedri Publishers 1995).

⁶⁰ Tekeste Negash, op. cit. n. 51, at pp. 48-49.

⁶¹ R. Guidotti and M. Gubellini, 'Il problema dei salari della mano d'opera di colore in Eritrea nel periodo pre e post-bellico', 12 *L'agricoltura coloniale* (1936) pp. 441-450; R. Pankhurst, 'Italian and "Native" Labour during the Italian Fascist Occupation of Ethiopia, 1935-1941', 2 *Ghana Social Science Journal* (1973) pp. 42-73.

⁶² Tekeste Negash, op. cit. n. 57; Jordan Gebre-Medhin op. cit. n. 38, at p. 86.

⁶³ Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, 'From Warriors to Urban Dwellers', 44 *Cahiers d'études africaines* (2004) pp. 533-574.

tion a large part of those immigrants, those who had not succeeded in consolidating their social and economic status, ended up in a sort of *lumpenproletariat* living within the interstices of the society in a situation of social marginality.⁶⁴

This aspect introduces the second theme, which is the politicisation of the so-called Təgray-Təgrəñña issue. For a better understanding of this issue it has to be recalled that the alternate relationship of rivalry, antagonism and interaction which has marked the precolonial history of Təgrəñña speakers along the two banks of the Mārāb went through another development after the creation in 1936 of the Africa Orientale Italiana which organized Italian colonies in the Horn of Africa along ethnic lines. Within this changed context, for a short time, Təgrəñña speakers on both sides of the Mārāb experienced a short-lived unified administration. This was a model that some of the Tigrean and Eritrean leaders tried to revive during the 1940s as a viable political option for the political future of the region. In the complex debate of the 1940s part of the debate focused on the possibility of imagining an Eritrean nation which would also include the Təgrəñña speakers of the Ethiopian region of Təgray. This option, which bore elements of continuity with the perception of Eritrea as centered around its Təgrəñña-speaking highlands, a notion inherited by previous traditions, had a very brief success among Eritrean and Tigrean leaders. Nevertheless it poisoned the political debate of those years introducing elements of ethnic chauvinism. These discourses in the 1940s, together with a controversial and often misunderstood notion of modernisation shaped the self-perception of Eritrean elites⁶⁵ and paved the way to patronising and, at times, despising attitudes toward Tigrean immigrants in Eritrea. Thus, in popular narratives Tigrean immigrants are described – and still are – in derogatory terms along stereotypical representations of backward, stingy and rough villains or beggars. This theme appears with cyclical frequency to haunt the history of Tigrean-Eritrean relations poisoning them with rancorous chauvinistic feelings. These kind of feelings have been revived even recently by the predominantly Tigrean leadership of the present Ethiopian government and media which used them as an argument to harangue its constituency during the 1998-2000 conflict.⁶⁶ In this way these kind of unacceptably offensive and discriminatory discourses have trickled down including to the virulent debate that has inflamed cyberspace during the 1998-2000 conflict.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Jordan Gebre-Medhin, op. cit. n. 38, at. p. 90.

⁶⁵ As examples of this intricate web of contradictions, the arguments used by the Association of Eritrean Intellectuals to support the cause of Eritrean independence from Ethiopia. See for instance: Association of Eritrean Intellectuals, 'Some Points on the People of Eritrea in Support of Their Striving for Independence' (Asmara, Silla 1949), a pamphlet published both in English and Italian.

⁶⁶ F. Guazzini, 'Riflessioni sulle identità di guerra nel cyberspazio: il caso eritreo-etiopico', 56 *Africa* (2001) pp. 532-572.

⁶⁷ V. Bernal, 'Eritrea Goes Global: Reflections on Nationalism in a Transnational Era', 19 *Cultural Anthropology* (2004) pp. 3-25; V. Bernal, 'Diaspora, Cuyberspace and Political Imagination. The Eritrean Diaspora Online', 6 *Global Networks* (2006) pp. 161-179; T.R. Hepner, 'Religion, Nationalism, and Transnational Civil Society in the Eritrean Diaspora', 10 *Identities* (2003) pp. 269-293.

Such is the persistence and relevance of this discourse that the Ethiopian scholar Alemseged Abbay has raised and discussed this issue in a recent book where he analyzes contemporary Eritreo-Tigrean relations.⁶⁸ The author discusses critically some aspects of the way Eritreans imagined their nation. He points out some contradictions which according to him, would stain this process and to a certain extent delegitimise it. However, the otherwise challenging and stimulating discussion is flawed by two major shortcomings. Firstly, there is the mistaken identification of Italian colonial rule with the Fascist period, which deprives his analysis of a diachronic perspective particularly with regard to important aspects of colonial policy such as customary law, land policies, education and racial bars. The second flaw is found in the author's insistence on using the existence of contradictions within the Eritrean nationalist discourses to deny the legitimacy of Eritrean nationalism *tout court*.

This debate introduces the third and last theme to be discussed which is the translation of the notion of modernity within Eritrean nationalist narratives. In the vibrant debate of the 1940s, Eritrean elites put great emphasis on elements of modernisations introduced by Italian colonialism. It was argued that infrastructural and technological developments, together with the relative spread of literacy (in spite of restrictive Italian educational policies) and a shared work ethic were key arguments to support the theory of the viability of Eritrea as an independent statehood.⁶⁹ Inevitably, this understanding of modernity (or may be modernisation) assumed an implicit argument claiming modernisation as a discriminatory tool to assess the specificities and differences between the Ethiopian and Eritrean polities. Alemseged Abbay correctly pointed out the artificial and weak nature of this nationalist use of modernity but overtaken perhaps by his criticism he has exceeded himself and has thus dismissed the historical legitimacy of Eritrean nationalist claims. It seems to me that the process of imagining a nation is by definition a contradictory and controversial one but this hardly has any bearing on the historical relevance of the process itself.⁷⁰ From this perspective, the ambiguity in the interplay of ethnicity, religion and language, which can be seen in the early stages of Eritrean nationalism, also reflects the contradiction inherent in colonial attitudes towards those issues. Moreover it seems to me that those contradictions, together with the strong emphasis put by Eritrean elites on modernity as their qualifying feature, are by no means unique to Eritrea. It would seem to be a characteristic of African elites at large, inasmuch as the very concept of modernity was so deeply rooted in the mainstream of Western culture that little room had been left for an alternative conceptualisation of it.

⁶⁸ Alemseged Abbay, *Identity Jilted or Re-imagining Identity?* (Trenton NJ, Red Sea Press 1998).

⁶⁹ This theme emerges frequently from many political documents of those years. See for instance: Association of Eritrean Intellectuals, *op. cit.* n. 65, at p. 8; Mohamed Omar Kadi, 'La politica e il destino', typewritten document in Research Documentation Centre of Eritrea (RDC) [His Fed 1].

⁷⁰ A more detailed analysis of this book can be found in Uoldelul Chelati Dirar 2007, *loc. cit.* n. 30, at p. 269.

5. THE FEDERAL PERIOD: FROM RIVALRY TO WARFARE

The period of the Federation which lasted for a decade, from 1952 to 1962, has been crucial in shaping the contemporary Eritreo-Ethiopian relationship and in escalating traditional elements of rivalry and antagonism into open warfare.

On December 2nd, 1950 the United Nations General Assembly approved Resolution 390A(V), that recommended that Eritrea would ‘...constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown’. Resolution 390A(V) represented the final step of a long and complex diplomatic process started in 1941 on the aftermath of the Italian defeat in the AOI, and that had the uneasy task of deciding the fate of the former Italian colonies. This decision was made particularly difficult by the interlacing of different and often conflicting local and international interests, expressing the variety of actors involved.⁷¹ Anze Matienzo, the Bolivian diplomat instructed by the UN to prepare a constitution for Eritrea, tried to implement the spirit of the recommendations included in the Resolution 390A(V) which called for a democratic constitution and ample room for self-rule. This constitutional arrangement with its strong democratic orientation, was also intended to reflect the economic and social development achieved by Eritrea under Italian colonial rule and, with much more dramatic pace, during the British administration.

However, Matienzo’s activities met with obstructionist attitudes on the Ethiopian side aimed at obtaining a constitutional charter that should have emptied the political meaning of the federal arrangement and its democratic provisions. As pointed out by Tekie Fessehatsion the main bone of contention were issues related to revenues, linguistic policies and other aspects related to the degree of political autonomy of Eritrea within the federal arrangement.⁷² The role played by the Ethiopian Foreign Minister Aklilu Habtewäld, who explored all possible means including the resort to personal threat to the UN envoyée, was crucial to the successful fulfillment of this strategy.⁷³ According to John Spencer the then advisor to the Ethiopian Emperor, Ethiopia eventually succeeded in obtaining significant modifications to the constitutional charter that modified the original framework suggested by the Resolution 390A(V). The new interpretation was closer to the Ethiopian point of view which reduced significantly Eritrea’s political autonomy within the federal arrangement.⁷⁴

⁷¹ The literature on this period is quite rich and controversial as a main reference the main contributions, though from contrasting perspectives remain Tekeste Negash, op. cit. n. 57 and Alemseged Tesfai, *Fädäräšən Erətra məs Ityopya kab Matiyenso kəsab Tedla 1951-1955* [Eritrea’s Federation with Ethiopia. From Matienzo to Tedla, 1951-1955] (Asmara, Hedri Publishers 2005).

⁷² Tekie Fessehatsion ‘Eritrea: From Federation to Annexation, 1952-1962’, ‘Eritreans for Peace and Democracy’, Working Paper No. 2, March, 1990, pp. 14-15.

⁷³ In his detailed analysis Tekie Fessehatsion quoting archival sources mention as Aklilu, in front of Matienzo reluctance to modify the draft constitution, threatened to have him fired from his position by being declared *Persona non grata*. Tekie Fessehatsion, loc. cit. n. 72, at p. 16.

⁷⁴ John Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay* (Algona, Reference 1984) p. 246.

Nevertheless, in spite of all those external pressures the Eritrean Constitution of 1952 maintained some remarkable features such as the equal access to fundamental rights and human rights for all citizens, and introduced relevant democratic liberties on sensitive issues like religious freedom, right to education, and tutelage of labour. More importantly, the Constitution acknowledged the cultural and linguistic complexity of Eritrea by establishing Təgrəñña and Arabic as official languages and contemplated the use of the other Eritrean languages, both in oral or written form, for all unofficial purposes. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of Eritrean society was acknowledged by accepting the legal existence of local communities for the defence of villages or tribal interests. Another important aspect was the issue of nationalities. In fact the Constitution of 1952 stressed the need to guarantee the rights of all different Eritrean nationalities affirming the right to have equal access to real rights without any discrimination due to religion, nationality or gender. However, in spite of its relatively progressive nature, the Eritrean Constitution of 1952 remained substantially ineffectual as it referred to a Federal structure that in practical terms was subsumed under the dominant institutional framework of the autocratic Ethiopian monarchy.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, the federal arrangement sponsored by the United Nations did not leave the Ethiopian state unaffected within which it sparked off several contradictions. A major element of contradiction were the democratic instances inscribed into the Eritrean constitution of 1952 that jarred with the authoritarian and autocratic constitutional framework of the Ethiopian Empire. A consequence of this can be seen in Haile Sellase's decision in 1955 to revise the constitution that he himself had promulgated in 1931.⁷⁶ From this perspective the revised Ethiopian constitution of 1955 had the uneasy task of opening venues for the new social actors which had emerged in post-war Ethiopia. The constitution was supposed to defuse the contradictions sparked by the Eritrean constitution and, at the same time, within a modernising framework to safeguard the autocratic rule of the emperor.⁷⁷

It is within this complex political process that the contrasts which arose between the Eritrean and Ethiopian government have to be understood, namely those on the issues of revenues, linguistic policies and the right to a separate flag. The conflict over revenues originated from a diametrically opposed interpretation of constitutional provisions. In the interpretation of the Eritrean government the major revenues yielded by the two ports of Massawa and Assäb should have been shared between the two governments. However, the Ethiopian government conveyed this wealth only to the central administration in Addis Abäba and little of it trickled down to the Eritrean administration.⁷⁸ This practice engendered an intense and consistent sequence of written complaints from the Eritrean government both to

⁷⁵ Jordan Gebre-Medhin, op. cit. n. 38, at pp. 107-143.

⁷⁶ Spencer, op. cit. n. 74, at pp. 256-257.

⁷⁷ For a detailed economic analysis of Haile Sellase's absolutism see Bahru Zewde, 'Economic Origins of the Absolutist State in Ethiopia', 17 *JES* (1984) pp. 18-26.

⁷⁸ Woldeab Woldemariam, *Bezaaba Megzaeti Tlyanen Englizn Federeshnen* in RDC [01917 His/Fed 04].

the Ethiopian government and the United Nation headquarters, which had little impact on imperial policies that were determined to reaffirm the predominance of the Ethiopian court.⁷⁹

The second reason for conflict had been the progressive suppression by the Ethiopian government of the right of Eritreans to use Arabic and Təgrəñña for its official activities and for educational purposes. As testified by the intensity of the cultural production thriving in the 1940s and 1950s languages had become a key component in the growth of Eritrean nationalism. In those years Eritreans had been busy drafting new educational curricula, producing textbooks and developing new field of cultural productions such as novels, drama and lyrics.⁸⁰ It is therefore understandable that the Ethiopian attempt to substitute Arabic and Təgrəñña with Amharic as the official language was met with angry reactions of Eritrean nationalists particularly among the students, who in 1957 organised mass demonstrations.⁸¹ Moreover, the forceful introduction of Amharic in public schools gave new momentum to an already established tradition of migration of Eritrean students, mainly Muslim, toward Egypt and the Middle East.⁸² They were prodromes of much more dramatic flows of refugees that would escape from Eritrea in the years to come.

Finally the most symbolically strong step taken against the Federal arrangement was the decision taken in 1959 by the Imperial Government to hoist the Ethiopian flag instead of the Eritrean one. This move caused days of protracted riots led by students of Asmara secondary schools, many of whom would end up few years later in the emerging Eritrean nationalist organisations.⁸³ It is not a coincidence that to this day in Eritrean nationalist discourses *bandiera*, the Italian word for flag, is often used as a synonym of independence.

On the basis of this evidence, the historical relevance of the Federation years can be summarised as being a very intense transitional period in which nationalist identities were strengthened through a process of polarisation and antagonism built up by compounding conflicting narratives. Thus both Eritrea and Ethiopia were ushered into decades of turmoil, warfare and destruction.

⁷⁹ Mohamed Omar Kadi, Woldeab Woldemariam, *The Complaint of the Eritrean People against Ethiopian Government*, 1957 in RDC [01908 His/Fed/1]; Mohamed Omar Kadi, *The Resolution and its Implementation*, in RDC [01985 His Fed 5].

⁸⁰ C. Matzke, 'Of Suwa Houses and Singing Contests: Early Urban Women Performers in Asmara, Eritrea', in M. Banham, J. Gibbs and F. Osofisan, eds., *African Theatre: Women* (Oxford, James Currey 2002).

⁸¹ Bereket Habte Selassie, *Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa* (New York, Monthly Review Press 1980) p. 61.

⁸² From these years on Cairo became one of the most vibrant centres of the Eritrean opposition taking full advantage of the supportive hospitality offered in Egypt by the Government led by Gamal Abdel Nasser. See J. Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1987) p. 103.

⁸³ Bereket Habte Selassie, op. cit. n. 81, at. p. 62; J. Markakis, 'The Nationalist Revolution in Eritrea', 26 *JMAS* (1988) pp. 51-70.

6. FULL SCALE AND PROTRACTED WARFARE: THE LIBERATION STRUGGLE

The Eritrean struggle for independence, which has affected so much of the human and material resources of the Eritrean people for over thirty years, is to many regards a special phenomenon in the context of African liberation struggles. The specificity of the Eritrean case has to be found in the duration of the conflict and moreover on the extremely composed and prolonged political and human experience of the leaders and militants that were involved in this struggle. That specially intense experience has dramatically formed Eritrean fighters and their leadership. This is now the leadership of the independent State of Eritrea. However, 'special' does not mean unique and, in this regard, as pointed out by Sara Rich Dorman, the study of the Eritrean struggle for independence is still in serious need of studies adopting a comparative perspective.⁸⁴

To partially counter this apparent scholarly limitation, the complex web of political and social trajectories drawn in Eritrea by the different forces which animated the liberation struggle from the late 1950s to 1991 should to be assessed both from an external and internal perspective. From an external point of view the steps that saw the development of Eritrean nationalism to the stage of Liberation are in line with contemporary experiences of nationalist struggle.⁸⁵ This is the case of the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM)⁸⁶ the first nationalist organisation to have fought for Eritrean independence. It assimilated much of the experience of the Sudanese Communist Party as well as the dominant theories on the conquest of political power through putsches which had great market in the late 50s, particularly in Middle Eastern political experiences.⁸⁷ Similarly in its early stage the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which succeeded the ELM, borrowed many of its early organisational and military features from the experience of the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale as well as from the ideological framework of Arab Nationalism developed by Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt and by Ba'athist governments in the Middle East.⁸⁸ Toward the late 1960s the ELF significantly changed

⁸⁴ S.R. Dorman, 'Narratives of Nationalism in Eritrea: Research and Revisionism', 11 *Nations and Nationalism* (2005) pp. 203-222.

⁸⁵ A. M. Babu, 'The Eritrean Question in the Context of African Conflicts and Superpowers Rivalries', in L. Cliffe and B. Davidson, eds., *The Long Struggle of Eritrea for Independence and Constructive Peace* (Trenton NJ, Red Sea Press 1988) p. 47; Bereket Habtesellase, 'The Eritrean Question in International Law', 6 *Horn of Africa* (1983) pp. 25-30.

⁸⁶ For the history of the Eritrean Liberation Movement popularly known as *Haraka* (movement, in Arabic) or *Mahber Shāw'atte* (Association of seven, in Təgrəñña), an invaluable and yet little utilised source remains Mohammed Said Nawad, *Harakat Tahrir Eritrea* (Asmara, n.p. 1998).

⁸⁷ Markakis, op. cit. n. 82, at p. 107; Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism, 1941-1993* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1995) pp. 100-102.

⁸⁸ D. Pool, 'The Eritrean People's Liberation Front', in C. Clapham, ed., *African Guerrillas* (Oxford, James Currey 1998) p. 19-35; Markakis, op. cit. n. 82, at p. 111; Fouad Makki, 'The Aporias of Radical Nationalism', in Hartmut Quehl, ed., *Living in War Times, Living in Postwar Times* (Felsburg, Eins Editions 2002) p. 201; Ruth Iyob, op. cit. n. 87, at pp. 109-110.

its political and ideological framework shifting from a pan-Arabist perspective to a more radical and leftist one.⁸⁹ Finally, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) that emerged as a radical splinter group from the ELF and through a long and bloody confrontation with the ELF⁹⁰ affirmed itself as the leading Eritrean nationalist force owed a lot to the radical ideology of similar contemporary nationalist movements mushrooming in those years in developing countries, namely to Maoism and to Amílcar Cabral's doctrine of the liberation struggle.⁹¹

With regard to these complex and swift developments in the regional political arena, the Ethiopian Emperor made a major and tragic misjudgement as, up until the mid-sixties he kept belittling the relevance of Eritrean nationalism. He depicted it as just a bunch of Muslim bandits funded by Arab money.⁹² Probably a more perspicacious assessment of the social and material basis of Eritrean nationalist claims would have spared Eritrea and Ethiopia the ordeal through which they have been for three decades. The myopic nature of Haile Sellase's approach is even more apparent if we take into account the developments of Ethiopian politics in the 1970s and particularly the surge of radical organisations such as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) in 1972,⁹³ the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)⁹⁴ in

⁸⁹ This change is expressed in particularly clear terms in an internal document produced in 1968 by the radical fringe of the front the document, significantly titled *The progressives demands radical changes in the Eritrean Liberation Front* challenges the ELF leadership, accused of corruption and of ab backward management of the front and calls for a new vision 'to make our struggle a progressive and to wipe out parochial sentiments which have been prevailing in our armed struggle for the last seven ears, in ELF, *The progressives demands radical changes in the Eritrean Liberation Front* in RDC [09847/Hist ELF].

⁹⁰ EPLF, *The Historical Background of the Civil War*, 1972 in RDC [01957, His/A.Strug/01], ELF, *Zəmdonna məs H.G.Ha.Ye*, typewritten document in RDC [01962, His/A.Strug/01].

⁹¹ D. Pool, 'The Eritrean People's Liberation Front', in C. Clapham, ed., *African Guerrillas* (Oxford, James Currey 1998) p. 19; Markakis, op. cit. n. 83; D. Pool, *From Guerrilla to Government. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front* (Oxford, James Currey 2001) pp. 59-60; M. Johnson and T. Johnson, 'Eritrea: The National Question and the Logic of Protracted Struggle', 80 *African Affairs* (1981) pp. 181-195; Fouad Makki, loc. cit. n. 88, at p. 213. For a broader revue of the issue see also J. Markakis, 'No Longer a Hidden War: Recent Writings on the Eritrean Nationalist Struggle', 19 *JMAS* (1981) pp. 362-366.

⁹² This interpretation of the ELF's constituency and support has been supported also by many academicians and analysts see for instance: H. Erlich, *The Struggle over Eritrea, 1962-1978* (Stanford, Hoover Institute 1983); Melaku Tegegn, 'Eritrea: problems of the National Movement', in *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on the Horn of Africa* (New York, 1989) p. 143; P. Henze, 'Behind the Ethiopian Famine', 67 *Encounter* (1986) pp. 5-17.

⁹³ The EPRP, though moving from a pan-Ethiopian perspective, acknowledged the right of Eritrea to self-determination and envisaged the development of a socialist Ethiopia. Though the official existence of the organisation was announced by the leadership only in August 1975, the leadership claimed to have established the main structure of the party as early as 1972, see Mamo Zeleke and Bayou Ayana, 'Interview with Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party', 45 *MERIP Reports* (1976) pp. 21-22. On the same issue see also M. Ottaway, 'Democracy and New Democracy: The Ideological Debate in the Ethiopian Revolution', 21 *African Studies Review* (1978) pp. 19-31.

⁹⁴ Established in 1973 the OLF inherited part of the tradition of the Mecha Tulema, an Oromo movement developed in the 60s. The OLF adopted a more radical standing including the use of armed struggle and affirmed to be engaged in a struggle for the liberation of the Oromo nation from what they defined as 'Ethiopian colonialism', see E. Keller, 'The Ethnogenesis of the Oromo Nation and Its

1973, the Tigray Liberation Front (TLF) in 1974 and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in 1975,⁹⁵ all clear evidence of the general transformation that the political landscape of the region was experiencing in those years.

Of crucial relevance here is the TPLF, a movement which developed in the vibrant and energetic atmosphere of political enthusiasm of the early 1970's. In this environment, marked by diffuse radicalism, the TPLF capitalized on the organizational and ideological experience of the ELF and EPLF and introduced within the Ethiopian polity the radical notion of the right of all nationalities to self-determination, including to independence.⁹⁶ Unfortunately, in its political trajectory the TPLF also introjected the despicable tendency of Eritrean nationalist organisations toward political cannibalism as it mercilessly swept away all radical organisations from the political arena that challenged its hegemonic role, namely the TLF and the EPRP which had some of their most important operational basis in the Təgray region.⁹⁷

However, from an internal perspective the analysis of the process that led to the development of nationalist forces resorting to the liberation struggle, needs to focus on two main issues which are the notion of territory and the notion of institutional and intra-state relations.

The notion of territory as developed by Eritrean and Ethiopian radical organisations is crucial because it encroaches into the notion of boundaries which haunted those organisations once they became governments. Generally speaking, there is a broad agreement on the idea that borders in Africa have great significance from the viewpoint of the state, as these are crucial to build and strengthen its own institutions. But at the same time borders have little meaning for ordinary citizens who have to cross those boundaries to make their living or for social reasons.⁹⁸ However, this broadly shared notion of borders within the African context assumes a special flavour if applied to the Horn of Africa where, as pointed out by Christopher Clapham, boundaries often assume contrasting meanings, as some states assert their very statehood by strengthening their borders and others by systematically renegotiating them or by attempting to bring down existing ones.⁹⁹ This multifac-

Implications for Politics in Ethiopia', 33 *JMAS* (1995) pp. 621-634. For a broader discussion of Oromo nationalism from an Oromo perspective see also Asafa Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethno-national Conflict, 1868-1992* (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers 1993).

⁹⁵ Both the TLF and TPLF fought for the rights of Tigrean people and just as in the case of the ELF and EPLF the difference between the two organisations, at least at the beginning, was of an ideological nature. The TPLF was marked by a more radical and Marxist orientation and eventually adopted the nationalist and independentist approach for Tigray. A detailed analysis of Tigrean nationalism, in J. Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia. The Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975-1991* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1997).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 153

⁹⁷ Aregawi Berhe, 'The Origins of the Tigray People's Liberation Front', 103 *African Affairs* (2004) pp. 569-592; J. Young, 'The Tigray and Eritrean Peoples Liberation Fronts: A History of Tensions and Pragmatism', 34 *JMAS* (1996) pp. 105-120.

⁹⁸ R.R. Larémont, ed., *Borders, Nationalism and the African State* (Boulder, Lynne Rienner 2005) p. 6.

⁹⁹ C. Clapham, 'Boundary and Territory in the Horn of Africa', in P. Nugent and A.I. Asiwaju, eds., *African Boundaries* (London, Pinter 1996) pp. 237-250.

eted attitude toward borders owes a lot to colonial partitions of the Horn. However, it has also substantially been shaped by perceptions and praxis developed by the major political actors of the region. In my discussion I will focus mainly on the two organisations that emerged victorious from the protracted struggle against the Ethiopian central government namely the EPLF and the TPLF.

In its definition of an Eritrean territory the EPLF has consistently claimed colonial boundaries as main source of legitimacy, therefore exacting for Eritrea the application of the principle of the inviolability of colonial boundaries in post-colonial Africa, as sanctioned by the OAU charter. A key component of this standing has been the vision of a multi-ethnic nation-state bound by its colonial past and unified by the shared experience of the protracted nationalist liberation struggle fought against Ethiopia.¹⁰⁰ A major driving force in the process of imagining the nation, the role of the liberation struggle as a moulder of identities with all its inherent contradictions has been the object of a quite intense debate over the past years. Scholars have dissected Eritrean nationalism and its impact on politics from different perspectives. At a stage when the somber clouds of war had not yet appeared Ruth Iyob has discussed, in relatively optimistic terms, the democratic perspectives of independent Eritrea in the light of its achievements in terms of demobilisation, economic growth, development strategies and people's empowerment.¹⁰¹ Kjetill Tronvoll has paid special attention to the nation building process in Eritrea trying to assess how effective the practices of empowerment have been particularly from the perspective of rural societies.¹⁰² Sara Rich Dorman has rather privileged the perspective of the interlace between academic research, nationalist discourses of the EPLF, and issues such as governance and human rights, pointing at the many contradictions that seem to emerge from this process.¹⁰³ Richard Reid has opted for a critical analysis of Eritrean nationalism from the perspective of the generational divide. This would affect the perception of the nation and of the nation-building process such as imagined by former fighters and by young Eritreans, grown in the post-independence decade. The author suggests that there is a progressive alienation of young Eritreans from nationalist narratives which are perceived as obstacles to their individual achievements.¹⁰⁴

It seems to me that a good starting point to analyse contemporary Eritrean nationalist narratives in their interactions with the notions of statehood and national territory, could be to analyse the ideological discourses developed by the EPLF. To this regard the EPLF's view on nation-building is best epitomised by the slogan 'unity in diversity' a slogan developed during the years of the liberation struggle.

¹⁰⁰ Fouad Makki, loc. cit. n. 88.

¹⁰¹ Ruth Iyob, 'The Eritrean Experiment. A Cautious Pragmatism?', 35 *JMAS* (1997) pp. 647-673.

¹⁰² K. Tronvoll, 'The Process of Nation-Building in Eritrea. Created from Below or Directed from Above?', 36 *JMAS* (1998) pp. 461-482.

¹⁰³ Dorman, loc. cit. n. 84.

¹⁰⁴ Very interesting analysis flawed only by the fact that the author seems to focus on urban educated youth and pays little attention to rural and pastoralist youth. R. Reid, 'Caught in the Headlights of History. Eritrea the EPLF and the Post-war Nation-State', 43 *JMAS* (2005) pp. 467-488.

It has gained a new and stronger meaning during the 1998-2000 conflict. The idea of nation which seems to emerge from this slogan is one in which the state grants room for the expression of cultural diversities which are tolerated and even encouraged (as long as they do not endanger the non negotiable unity of the state). In this perspective the EPLF first and its post-independence epigone, the People Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) later,¹⁰⁵ advocated to themselves the monopolistic handling of political power at the same time trying energetically to construct a shared feeling of national belonging among an extremely composed population. In a context where different economic and cultural traditions were mirrored in different perceptions of the space and its delimitation¹⁰⁶ colonial borders and their tenacious defence through the long years of the liberation struggle could be the only shared reference. Within this complex ideological and political mindset EPLF/PFDJ's notion of the national territory, its spatial perception and its practical administration seem to have been marked by a mix of pragmatism and the strong, though naively over optimistic, belief that colonial boundaries provided solid enough arguments for the future delimitation and demarcation of national boundaries.¹⁰⁷ For these reasons during the liberation struggle the EPLF did not seem to pay too much attention to the effective definition of its future political jurisdiction, contrary to the ELF. At least through its political materials the ELF seemed to suggest a stronger and more formal concern with the issue of borders and their exact delimitation.¹⁰⁸

On the Ethiopian side the theory and praxis of the TPLF, though strongly influenced in its early development by the EPLF,¹⁰⁹ developed a rather different approach with regard to crucial issues such as the state and its territorial representation. From the scanty documentary evidences available to scholarly investigation, it seems that the TPLF on the issue of borders had a much less accommodating attitude. Already in 1986, according to Ghädäy Zäratsion, a former senior member of the TPLF, its leadership was contemplating the use of force against the EPLF in the case of trespassing of what were assumed to be Tigrean borders. This account based on personal recollections of the author refers to episodes of tension on the

¹⁰⁵ J. Markakis, 'Eritrea's National Charter', 22 *Review of African Political Economy* (1995) pp. 126-129.

¹⁰⁶ K. Tronvoll, 'Borders of Violence – Boundaries of Identity: Demarcating the Eritrean Nation-state', 22 *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (1999) pp. 1037-1060.

¹⁰⁷ The complexity of colonial praxis on boundary matters appears in all its evidence throughout the pages of the final decision of the Eritrea – Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) which shows without ambiguity the complexity of the matter and the number of issues at stake. Cf., Eritrea – Ethiopia Boundary Commission, 'Decision Regarding Delimitation of the Border between The State of Eritrea and The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia', available at <www.pca-cpa.org/showpage.asp?pag_id=1150>.

¹⁰⁸ This different attitude emerges for instance from the political material produced by the ELF see for instance *Wəštawi mätshet [Internal publication]* a typewritten or official documents such as ELF, 'A Programmatic Declaration Approved by the First National Congress' (Damascus, 1971); ELF, 'The National Democratic Revolution vs Ethiopian Expansionism' (Beirut, 1979); ELF, 'Political Programme approved by the 2nd National Congress of the ELF' (Beirut, 1975).

¹⁰⁹ Young, loc. cit. n. 97.

two fronts caused by what the TPLF perceived as Eritrean encroachments in the surroundings of Badämmä, to recruit new fighters.¹¹⁰

From a broader perspective, a major source of contradiction for the TPLF has been its need to define the legitimacy of its political and territorial claims with regard to the Ethiopian state without having the possibility to resort to colonial boundaries. This contradiction has deeply shaped both the political theory and praxis of the TPLF since its very inception and to some extent even keeps affecting contemporary politics of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The best example of this ambiguity is the famous *TPLF Manifesto* of 1976 in which was summarised the main vision of the front for its action and future political development within the Ethiopian polity. This document argued that the first step of what it defines as a national struggle ‘will be the establishment of an Independent democratic republic of Tigray’.¹¹¹ Though lately rejected by a congress of the TPLF the main ideological framework of the 1976 Manifesto was to inspire TPLF praxis in the years to come. Its influence can be seen in the special emphasis put by the TPLF-led coalition in the present Ethiopian government on the right to self-determination of Ethiopian nationalities including the right to secession and in the adoption of the federal arrangement for post-Mängəstu Ethiopia.¹¹² It seems to me that this substantially different attitude of the TPLF, beside the ideological aspects, reflects also the relatively more homogeneous ethnic composition of Təgray. Təgray would not be seriously threatened by a radical application of the right to self-determination.

This principle, consistently defended by the TPLF and finally implemented in the post-1991 Ethiopian state, had already been a major source of tension and antagonism during the period of the liberation struggle between the TPLF and the EPLF as well as with pan-Ethiopian forces such as the EPRP. In the relations with the EPLF this issue repeatedly caused confrontations because the standing of the two organisations was ideologically inassimilable.¹¹³ On one side the EPLF rooted

¹¹⁰ To this regard the author quotes minutes of a meeting he attended in which the following statement would allegedly have been made: ‘If the EPLF trespasses the present borders, even if we are not sure that the contested areas belong to Tigray, we will consider the EPLF as an aggressor and we will go to war. If the documents for demarcating the border areas, which now are under the Tigrean administration, prove to the contrary we will consider them as a Tigrean territory because they have been under “effective administration of Tigray”. The identity of a people is determined by the unity and common history created under the same administration. The type of areas, which are under the Tigrean administration (areas in Belesa – Muna and in Erob) which in the maps are shown within the boundaries of Eritrea will be under common administration of TPLF and EPLF. If the EPLF rejects this and tries to administer it alone, we will consider the EPLF as an aggressor state.’ Cf., Ghidey Zeratsion, ‘The Ideological and Political Causes of the Ethio-Eritrean War. An Insiders View’, unpublished paper presented at the International Conference on the Ethio-Eritrean Crises, Amsterdam July 24, 1999.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Young, op. cit. n. 95, at p. 99.

¹¹² Merera Gudina, ‘Contradictory Interpretations of Ethiopian History. The Need for a New Consensus’, in D. Turton, ed., *Ethnic Federalism. The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford, James Currey 2006) p. 119; Assefa Fisseha, ‘Theory versus Practice in the Implementation of Ethiopia’s Ethnic Federalism’, in D. Turton, ed., *Ethnic Federalism. The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford, James Currey 2006) p. 131.

¹¹³ Young, loc. cit. n. 97.

the legitimacy of its claims on the OAU acknowledgement of the inviolability of boundaries inherited by colonialism. It therefore presented the Eritrean struggle as a case of anti-colonial struggle originated by the missed decolonisation of an African multi-national state. Obviously, this view could not accommodate the TPLF notion of the right to self-determination (and even secession of all nationalities). It has to be stressed that this strong contradiction led to another major source of tension between the two organisations. In fact EPLF and TPLF defined, in substantially divergent ways, the nature of their political and military co-operation. The EPLF defined it as 'strategical' whereas the TPLF defined it as 'tactical'. Though it may appear to be just vetero Marxist-Leninist hair splitting, these ideological divergences piled up and simmered during the years of the liberation struggle. They might also be identified as elements that contributed to the development of a tense political environment eventually leading to some of the current disagreements and tensions between the Eritrean and Ethiopian state.¹¹⁴

A second and final aspect to be taken into account in the discussion of internal perspectives that shaped the political praxis of militant organisations in the region is the different articulation of notions of institutions, state and intra-state relations as they developed in the political theory and praxis of the two organisations. During the years of armed struggle emerged a clear asymmetry between EPLF and TPLF visions in this respect. A first element of disagreement can be identified in the different perception that the two organisations had of the military and political set-up of their organisations. On the one side the EPLF insisted on a stronger formalisation of the organisational set up into departments reproducing within the organisation the skeleton of the state. To this regard the areas administered by the EPLF represented 'laboratories of experimentation' for the future independent Eritrea.¹¹⁵ Similarly the EPLF insisted on the formalisation of guerrilla military structures into an operational structure similar to that of conventional armies and, when logistically possible, supported conventional warfare.¹¹⁶ However, when it comes to the notion of intra-state relations the EPLF seems to have developed a much more informal and pragmatic approach. There was not much room for the formalisation of relations prioritising what were perceived as strong links of solidarity developed during the armed struggle. This unconventional attitude also persisted in the first years of independence when, as pointed out by Ruth Iyob, 'the newly formed government of Eritrea and Ethiopia have glossed over one of the problems that commonly face diasporic states: the demarcation of its boundaries and the safety of its population'.¹¹⁷ On the Eritrean side the excess of confidence of the EPLF/PFDJ and the incredibly low speed of the processes of institution-

¹¹⁴ Young, op. cit. n. 95, at p. 156; R. Reid, 'Old Problems in New Conflicts: Some Observations on Eritrea and Its Relations with Tigray, from Liberation Struggle to Inter-state War', *73 Africa* (2003) pp. 369-401.

¹¹⁵ Pool, op. cit. n. 91, at p. 118.

¹¹⁶ Gebru Tareke, 'From Lash to Red Star: The Pitfalls of Counter-Insurgency in Ethiopia, 1980-82', *40 JMAS* (2002) pp. 465-498.

¹¹⁷ Ruth Iyob, loc. cit. n. 3.

building within the independent state have contributed dramatically to the continuation of dangerously vague relations with Ethiopia. On the other side, the TPLF had a substantially different attitude on organisational issues. Great emphasis was put on the close connection with the peasantry which was to be reaffirmed through the adoption of a less formal organisational set-up. Therefore, though ideologically extremely connoted in Marxist-Leninist terms¹¹⁸ the TPLF in its political praxis resorted to more informal approaches. These did not even exclude the mimetic adoption of traditional values and religious symbolisms in the political activity among Tigrean peasants.¹¹⁹ From the military point of view this different attitude was made explicit by the fact that although the TPLF did not reject conventional warfare, it kept attributing a great role to unconventional warfare within which a relevant role was played by peasant militias.¹²⁰

When it comes to defining and imagining intra-state relations the TPLF trajectory has been more nuanced than the EPLF's one. On one side during the years of the struggle, the TPLF similarly to the EPLF developed a model of popular democracy with a relatively high degree of popular participation in decision making and handling of public administration.¹²¹ However, this model after the overthrow of the Därg regime experienced a serious crisis as the TPLF on a national level had to deal with a much larger and more complex state apparatus than it had experienced up to that stage. The presence of sophisticated and experienced civil services inherited by the long established bureaucratic apparatus of the Ethiopian state with whom the TPLF had to negotiate and surrender part of its otherwise monopolistic handling of power, has been central in the TPLF case. To a certain extent, the increasing strain in the relations between the two movements and the two states in the years preceding the outbreak of the 1998-2000 conflict, could also be ascribed to the tension between the survival of a model of intra-state relations based on informal camaraderie but subject to the growing pushes of the traditional apparatus for a more formalised and less ambiguous pattern of diplomatic relations.

7. CONCLUSION

In this essay I have tried to show how historical developments in the region explain the presence of frequent elements of rivalry that often escalated in antagonism and sometime warfare. These elements should not be interpreted in a mechanist way as necessary causes of the present loggerhead between Eritrea and Ethiopia but can help to understand some historical aspects of rivalry and tensions that simmer between the two polities. From a historical perspective a better and more factual understanding of the specific reasons of the 1998-2000 conflicts would require

¹¹⁸ It has to be recollected that in the 1980s the TPLF developed a strong as much as anachronistic interest into Albania as a model socialist country. See Young, *op. cit.* n. 95, at p. 155.

¹¹⁹ Young, *op. cit.* n. 95, at p. 174.

¹²⁰ Gebru Tareke, 'From Af Abet to Shire: The Defeat and Demise of Ethiopia's "Red" Army 1988-89', 42 *JMAS* (2004) pp. 239-281.

¹²¹ J. Young, 'Development and Change in Post-revolutionary Tigray', 35 *JMAS* (1997) pp. 81-99.

extensive and fair access to official documents, from both parties and also from the main parties involved at the level of international diplomacy. I am afraid this will only be possible for future generations of scholars.

How to explain this tragic resort to warfare in a political landscape already ravaged by protracted years of conflicts and displacement remains the baffling question for scholars and analysts. May-be provisional and empirical answers could be found in the persistence of 'military' procedures of decision making within the leadership of both countries or, more banally, in the old saying that those who take the decision of waging war often underestimate the long term consequences of war and its broader implications.