

Trespassing boundaries. The challenges for Eritrean historiography¹

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Introduction

I would like to start by thanking the editors of this book that gave me the privilege to contribute to this collective gift to a dear friend and a colleague who, for many decades, has enlivened the historiography on Eritrea. In fact Tekeste, though since our very first meeting² we tended more often to disagree rather than agree on sundry issues, has nonetheless had the indisputable merit of having consistently been a challenging provoker. His independent views and often original approaches to Eritrean history have been crucial in opening new paths of research and in suggesting new perspectives³. Therefore, with this paper I want to pay my respect to his lifelong epistemological struggle by discussing some methodological and hermeneutical issues which I deem crucial for the future development of Eritrean historiography.

The aim of this paper is to discuss, with no pretense of being exhaustive, some of the main epistemological shortcomings of Eritrean historiography and, at the

1 A first version of this paper was submitted at the symposium “Giornata internazionale di studi sull’Eritrea” organised at the IUO in Naples on May 2010 by Prof Lusini to whom I’m indebted for his generous hospitality and to whom I still owe my apologies for not having been able to submit a final version of my presentation.

2 This happened on 1996 at the “Adwa: A Challenge to History?”, *Adwa Centenary Conference*, organised by the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, in Addis Ababa and Adwa between February 25 and March 2, 1996.

3 To this regard I consider crucial milestones in my academic development his masterpieces: Tekeste Negash *No Medicine for the Bite of a White Snake: Notes on Nationalism and Resistance in Eritrea, 1890-1940*, Uppsala, University of Uppsala, 1986; Tekeste Negash *Italian colonialism in Eritrea, 1882-1941: policies, praxis, and impact*, Uppsala, Uppsala University, 1987; Tekeste Negash *Eritrea and Ethiopia: the federal experience*, Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1997.

same time, to suggest possible alternative frameworks, mainly on the basis of my own research and teaching experience carried out both in Eritrea and in Italy over the past 15 years.

I hope this will also contribute to foster a lively and free debate on Eritrean history and, in a broader perspective, on Eritrea's nation building process, which I think is much needed both within the Eritrean academic community and society at large.

1. Methodological issues

A great deal of inspiration for this paper comes from an article by John Coakley⁴ that I found fascinating and impressively close to many reflections that have filled my mind in the recent years when thinking about the main trends and challenges ahead of the new Eritrean historiography.

At the very beginning of his article, discussing «the centrality of historical interpretation to the process of the creation and maintenance of ethnic or national solidarity», Coakley states that,

The capacity of political elites to shape political outcomes by influencing the way in which the past is perceived and interpreted is a well-known characteristic of public life. It is not, then, surprising that the education, information, and foreign ministries of the modern state devote particular attention to matters of history, especially in contexts where a political regime feels threatened.

He then goes on to explain how history can absolve a handful of purposes such as helping in the consolidation of particular regimes (especially if they are aware of the relevance of the past in legitimizing contemporary ideologies); developing a selective reconstruction of the past in which the main actors are divided between heroes and villain traitors; bending historical and archaeological narratives to the endorsement of contemporary claims over disputed territories or, eventually, providing an ideology of legitimacy to the vanquished in order to «revive the flagging spirits of a vanquished people»⁵.

Coakley further develops his analysis explaining that the process of construction of the sense of a shared past is often the result of a selective and oversimplified

4 Coakley, J. "Mobilizing the past: nationalist images of history" in *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, vol. 10, 2004, pp. 531-560.

5 Coakley, J. "Mobilizing the past: nationalist images of history", cit.

reading of historical events, which then often results in gross misinterpretation instead of just being the by-product of an objective historical experience. Those tamed historical narratives would thus play three main functions: the rallying of otherwise divided communities behind a shared set of claims; their mobilisation through given political channels and the legitimisation of the nationalist struggle on the international arena. This framework, to be successful, assumes the deep involvement of professional historians, who are asked to play the pipe for the power that be.

On these grounds, according to Coakley, nationalist historiographies would fulfill at least one of the following functions: define the conceptual boundaries of the nation; reinforce a shared feeling of pride in national achievements; nurture self-commiseration over the unfair suffering and thus justifies the claim for some form of compensation; legitimise the ongoing nationalist struggle by rooting it into the past or, finally, provide inspiration for the future of the nation, described as necessarily bright and glorious.

Reading and rereading those lines I was struck by their incredible, and I would even say urgent, relevance for Eritrean historiography. Therefore, starting from these broad methodological suggestions, I will move onto a more detailed discussion of the Eritrean case.

2. Problems in Eritrean history

Writing in 1994, in a period marked by shared enthusiasm and optimism about the future of independent Eritrea and the Horn of Africa at large, Prof. Bairu Tafla⁶ analysed in very clear terms some of the limitations that Eritrean historiography had to deal with and, at the same time, he laid out possible new paths to be explored by present and future generations of historians. With impressive visionary words, Prof. Bairu stated that it was high time for historiography in the region to stop playing the role of “liberation history” and start moving toward a liberated history, acknowledging the complex web of connections and exchange that has linked the history of the Horn of Africa and giving voice to the plural narratives emerging from the undeniable interdependence that has shaped the history of the region since time immemorial.

6 Bairu Tafla “Interdependence through Independence: The challenges of Eritrean Historiography” in Marcus, H.G.(ed.) *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies, Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Michigan State University 5-10 September, 1994*, Lawrenceville, Red Sea Press, 1994, pp. 497-514.

Along a similar track, Prof. Irma Taddia⁷ has been insisting on the idea that, though it is legitimate to develop national historiographies, especially for a young and identity-craving state like Eritrea, it is also crucial not to lose the broader perspective of the complex, continuous and strong connections that have been unfolding on regional level⁸. The underlying assumption was that the excessive emphasis on the national (some time just nationalist) perspective, would have led to a rather narrow hermeneutical approach, missing the broader and more articulate historical picture.

Unfortunately, some 20 years after these inspired and visionary suggestions, it seems that Eritrea has yet to reconcile with its own past. History, in the region, remains an arena where political conflict is carried out with other means. In spite of the above mentioned enlightening suggestions, it seems to me that we have been unable to take stock of previous experiences and mistakes and, paraphrasing a famous, powerful pamphlet by Roman Jakobson⁹, I would say that our generation has squandered its historians and even the new generations, which could have taken over the task of building a new and vibrant historiography, are now scattered in exile all over the planet, but in Eritrea. It is therefore not a futile exercise to try to make sense of those persisting fragmented visions of the Eritrean past and to untie the knots that still keep Eritrean historiography and society tied up.

From a broad point of view, a first, untied knot can be found in the missed liberation of Eritrean society and of its political and social dialectic. In other words, the liberation of Eritrea from Ethiopian oppression and the achievement of national independence has not implied the complete and effective liberation of Eritrean people and society which, in a sort of Sisyphus¹⁰ damnation, has just

7 Taddia, I. "Some reflexions on Ethiopian Studies Today" in *The Australasian Review of African Studies*, XXVI, 1 (2004), pp. 18-25; Taddia, I. "Il Corno d'Africa fra colonialismo, problemi dello Stato e conflitti" in *Africa* (Rome), LIX, 1 (2004), pp. 92-100.

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

9 In a brief but very intense essay Jacobson argued that the Bolshevik revolution had slowly eaten its own child, especially that generation of poets which had generously and uncompromisingly donated itself to what believed was the cause of progress, innovation and change for a better society; Jacobson, R. "On a Generation that Squandered its Poets" in Pomorska, K.; Rudy, S. (eds.), *Language in Literature*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1997, pp. 273-300.

10 According to Greek mythology, the gods as a punishment for having challenged them, condemned Sisyphus, king of Ephyra (Corinth), to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would always roll back down of its own weight, forcing him to begin again and again.

kept dragging itself from a *zāmān*¹¹ to another: from *zāmān mäsafānt*¹², to *zāmān Yohannäs*¹³, to *zāmān Mənlək*¹⁴, to *zāmān Tilyan*¹⁵, to *zāmān Janhoy*¹⁶, to *zāmān Därgi*¹⁷ and now to *zāmān Sha'abiya*¹⁸.

However, a scholar cannot be satisfied with this explanation which, without further elaboration, would be rather simplistic and banal. In fact, though it is apparent that in the 20/22 years after the achievement of its toughly and bravely conquered independence, Eritrea as a State and as a Nation has missed all its basic political targets such as institution building, transparency and accountability of state and government procedures, freedom of expression and association as well as freedom of movement; this by itself does not provide adequate and satisfactory understanding of the missed liberation of its historiography.

2.1 *The issue of Periodisations*

As stated earlier, there are several epistemological knots that still keep Eritrean historiography hostage of political agendas and that need to be untied. A first, major issue is periodisation. In spite of various thoughtful attempts¹⁹, a convincing periodisation of Eritrean history has yet to be framed and the great bulk of Eritrean historiography deals with the events that unfolded from the 19th Century, namely with the coming of Italian colonial rule, while whatever had happened before still lay in a broad and not particularly significant notion of precolonial history. In other words there is an apparent historiographic deficit when dealing with the huge and yet untapped wealth of that section of the Eritrean past.

11 The Tigrinya word *zāmān* could be translated as “era” or “period of..”. An interesting analysis from this perspective in Mahrt M. “War, Spatio-temporal Perception, and the Nation: Fighters and Farmers in the Highlands” in O’Kane, D.; Hepner, T.R. (eds.) *Biopolitics, Militarism, and Development: Eritrea in the Twenty-First Century*, New York, Berghahn, 2011, pp. 17-33.

12 Era of the Princes or one of the most complex and fragmented period of Ethiopian and Eritrean history.

13 Era of Emperor Yohannes II.

14 Era of Emperor Menelik.

15 Era of the Italians.

16 Era of Emperor Haile Selasse II.

17 Era of the Derg or the Marxist leninist giunta that ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991.

18 The present era marked by the rule of the PFDJ, former EPLF, popularly known also as *Sha'abiya*, from its Arabic nickname.

19 A very intense debate on this issue went on during the First International Conference of Eritrean Studies, held in Asmara from July 22 to 26, 2001.

I have the feeling that this deficit could be attributed to two main reasons. A first reason could be the lack of sound linguistic competence in terms of Ge'ez language that has not been adequately developed within the Eritrean university system²⁰ and is thus hampering the development of a sound historiographic tradition. A second reason is the relatively uneasy relation with a past that is still crammed with cumbersome celebratory representations of the Ethiopianist²¹ rhetoric that, while creating a narrative of alleged continuity of Ethiopian history through millennia²², have consistently belittled the role played in this long process by other communities including the Eritreans ones²³.

It is thus not a coincidence that some of the most relevant contributions on this portion of the Eritrean past have been provided mainly by foreign scholars²⁴, particularly in the fields of linguistics²⁵ and archeology²⁶. A comforting evidence

20 Evidence of this delayed development is the fact that, for quite a while, prominent leaders of Asmara University questioned the relevance of teaching Ge'ez within the offering of Eritrean languages arguing that it was not an Eritrean language.

21 Some major examples of this tradition are the famous Tekletsadiq Mekuria *Ye Ityopia tarikh ke atse Tewdros eske qeddami Hayle Sellase* [History of Ethiopia from Emperor Tewodros to Emperor Hayle Selassie II], Addis Ababa, Berhanena Selam, 1968. Jones H.M.; Monroe, H. *A History of Ethiopia*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1935; Perham, M. *The Government of Ethiopia*, London, Faber, 1948; Ullendorf, E. *The Ethiopians: an introduction to country and people*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1961; Levine, D. *Greater Ethiopia: the evolution of a multiethnic society*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1974; Rubenson, S. *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence*, London, Heinemann, 1976; Marcus, H. *History of Ethiopia*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994; Pankhurst, R. *The Ethiopians: a history*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1998 as well as the recent Henze, P. *Layers of Time: a history of Ethiopia*, London, Hurst, 2000.

22 A critical discussion of this historiographic trend in Triulzi, A. "Battling with the Past: New Frameworks for Ethiopian Historiography" in James, W. et al. (eds.) *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism & After*, Oxford, James Currey, 2002, pp. 276-88 and Clapham, C. "Rewriting Ethiopian history" in *Annales d'Éthiopie*, 18 (2002), 37-54.

23 Sorenson, J. "Discourses on Eritrean Nationalism and Identity" in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 29, n. 2, 1991, pp. 301-317 and also Sorenson, J. *Imagining Ethiopia: struggles for history and identity the Horn of Africa*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993.

24 A notable exception is the fundamental work done by Prof. Bairu Tafla with the special issue of the Eritrean Studies Review which he edited in 2007 and that was completely devoted to Eritrea in the 19th C before the arrival of the Italians. See: Guest Editor, Bairu Tafla "Eritrea on the Eve of European Colonial Rule" in *Eritrean Studies Review*, vol. 5, n.1, 2007.

25 Particularly relevant in this field the contribution of the Italian school as represented by the production of the late Paolo Marrassini and his disciples Alessandro Bausi, Gianfrancesco Lusini and Alessandro Gori.

26 See particularly the sholarly production of Rodolfo Fattlovitch, Andrea Manzo, Peter Schmidt and Matt Curtis. On Eritrea between the 18th and 19th C a fantastic and innovative contribution has

of the achieved maturity of Eritrean historiography will be possible only when Eritrean historians will easily and confidently deal with both the history of *Kommishtato*²⁷ as well as the history of the kingdom of Damat or the monastery of Däbrä Bizän, without feeling any more the need for asserting a specific, though unlikely, Eritreanness of that history.

3. The conceptualisation of colonialism in Eritrean society

Another epistemological knot consists in the simplified and overstretched use of a crucial notion in Eritrean historiography, namely colonialism. In fact, though colonialism has been one of the main objects of historiographic inquiry within Eritrean intellectual and political milieux, the degree of effectively shared knowledge that Eritreans have achieved about this founding period of contemporary Eritrean history is still highly questionable. In fact, on one side, conventional nationalist narratives have repeatedly stated that Italian colonialism has been a watershed in the development of Eritrean societies to the extent that it could be considered a major catalyst of the very notion of Eritrean nationhood. Nevertheless, what is still missing is an in-depth and articulated analysis of the real impact of Italian colonialism on Eritrean societies and to what extent it has been able to effectively change their power structures, social relations, labour organisation, local identities etc. Moreover, we still need to ascertain to what extent the impact of Italian colonialism can be seen as relatively homogeneous and to what extent as just limited to some specific contexts, such as urban areas or military garrisons and their surroundings. In other words, we still need to break down the impact of Italian colonialism on rural, nomadic and semi-nomadic populations and the, even further, along ethnic, religious and gender lines. To this regard, it seems to me that the predominant emphasis on the exploitative relations between the colonised and the colonisers has certain limitations²⁸. One of those being that it ignores the complex interactions of the Eritrean societies with the colonial power and tend

been Miran, J. *Red Sea citizens: cosmopolitan society and cultural change in Massawa*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2009.

27 *Kommishtato* the Eritreanised version of the Italian *campo cintato* (enclosed camp), refers to the part of down-town Asmara which was originally planned as a white only district and that has later become the quintessential symbol of modern Eritrean urban life and identity.

28 To this regard a crucial contribution has been the seminal work of a dear friend and colleague, the late Alexander Naty, whose untimely death has deprived us of an extremely brilliant and intellectually free source of inspiration. See for instance Alexander Naty, "Memories of the Kunama of Eritrea towards Italian Colonialism", *Africa*, (Rome) 56, 4 (2002), 573-589.

to build a rather Manichean discourse on the colonial experience which would see Eritreans as fiercely and consistently pitched against Italian colonial rule. This reading of the colonial experience ignore the level of interaction and differentiated positioning that marked those years and does not provide adequate answer to the complex role of colonial troops and civil servants²⁹.

However, a further element that has for a long time blurred the historiographic understanding of Italian colonialism in Eritrea, has been the overstretched use of the very notion of “colonialism” within (the context of) nationalist narratives. In fact, many political and teaching materials produced in the field, during the years of the liberation struggle and partially recycled into the teaching materials developed later in the first years after independence, would normally start by stating that Eritrea has been subjected to various *colonial* forces such as Turkish, Egyptian, Italian, British and Ethiopian³⁰. Building up on the ambiguity of the Tigrinya term *gäza’ti*, which can roughly be translated as rulers or occupiers, Eritrean nationalist narratives have translated it into “colonialism” and, playing with this ambiguity, they have also gained international currency for their arguments as well as internal consensus.

It is, in fact, evident that this nonchalant use of the term colonialism referring to historical periods so different and chronologically distant from one another has been very useful for political purposes inasmuch it has nurtured a strong feeling of belonging based on what Coakley has defined as «feelings of self-commiseration over the unfair suffering of the nation»³¹. Moreover, in terms of international support, putting the Eritrean nationalist struggle against Ethiopia within the framework of anti-colonial struggle³² has made possible to link it to the broader

29 See for instance Gebre-Medhin J. *Peasant and Nationalism in Eritrea*, Trenton, Red Sea Press, 1989.

30 Exaples of this attitude can be found in Osman Saleh Sabbe *The History of Eritrea*, Beirut, Dar el-Masirah, 1974; Zemhret Yohannes *Italyawi megza’ti ab Ertra* (Italian Colonialism in Eritrea), Asmara, Hidri, 2010; as well as in the political literature of the main nationalist organizations during the years of liberation struggle such as Eritrea’s Liberation Front ELF *The Struggle of Eritrea*, Damascus, n.p., 1965; Eritrea’s Liberation Front (ELF) *Tarikh Sewra Iertra* (History of the Eritrean Revolution), Field, 1973, and Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), *Eretran qalsan, Kab tenti Kesa’è 1941* (‘Eritrea and its Struggle. From Ancient Times to 1941’), Field, 1978.

31 Coakley, J. “Mobilizing the past: nationalist images of history” in *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, vol. 10, 2004, pp. 531-560.

32 The National Charter approved in Nakfa on February 1994, in its very incipit still declared «Today, Eritrea finds itself on the verge of a new chapter in its history. For fifty years, the country and its people suffered under colonial rule. The colossal task of ridding itself of this colonial rule, and establishing national independence and dignity, has been achieved. For the first time, the people

wave of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements animating the radical left wing all over the world and has paid back in terms of international support. However, from a historiographic perspective the undifferentiated usage of the term colonialism, has diluted and made evanescent its historical specificity and has thus emptied it of its epistemological value. In other words it has made it difficult to provide real knowledge of colonialism, the alleged object of the discourse.

4. Choices for Eritrean historiography:

On the grounds of the statements above, I therefore believe that Eritrean historiography is now at a crossroads and important epistemological decisions have to be taken. The choice to be made is basically between simplification and complexity. In other words, the choice is between a domesticated and simplified reading of the Eritrean past, which would eventually amount to a fabrication of the past, and a much more articulated and not predictable reconstruction of this past which could eventually bring about healing and reconciliation among communities, thanks to a dispassionate and open acknowledgment of the existence of plural and not necessarily harmonised voices.

There is a strong need for new historiographic perspectives, capable of challenging empty ideological smokescreens such as those epitomised by the slogan “unity in diversity” as well as the many mythological representations of Eritrean nationalist movements and to produce new and plural knowledge and understanding of the Eritrean past. Unity in diversity has been the constant jingle of Eritrean nationalist narratives during the long years of the Liberation struggle³³ and a cornerstone of its approach to nation-building in independent Eritrea³⁴. The broad meaning of this slogan was that, though Eritrea presents a rather differentiated, ethno-linguistic, cultural and socio economic landscape, this diversity should not be perceived as a

of Eritrea have become masters of their own country and hold their future in their own hands». See PFDJ *National charter* available on line at <http://www.youngpfdj.org/index.php?option=com_docman&Itemid=137> accessed on April 2, 2013

33 I would even say that still is shared among the present Eritrean opposition forces as stated recently in one of their websites which, quoting one leader of the Eritrean Islamic Congress stated «Embracing unity in diversity is key to peace and harmony in Eritrea, says Mr. Hassan Salman who is Head of the Sudan based Eritrean Islamic Congress – one of the 13 members of the opposition Eritrean Democratic Alliance». see <http://cdrie.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=58:eritrea-embracing-unity-in-diversity&catid=34:english-articles&Itemid=53> accessed on April 2, 2013.

34 See the PFDJ *National charter* available on line at <http://www.youngpfdj.org/index.php?option=com_docman&Itemid=137> accessed on April 2, 2013

source of troubles and internecine strife as it would be bound by a stronger and more intense feeling of national belonging nurtured by the shared experience of the liberation struggle against Ethiopian rule³⁵.

However, it seems to me that here has not been any deep and free assessment of the extent, relevance and consistence of this diversity. Moreover, the conventional narrative on Eritrean “diversity” is based on a sanitised representation of Eritrean social and cultural pluralism, which, when it comes to ethnicity, cultures and traditions, just capitalises on colonial literature (namely Alberto Pollera’s³⁶ and Carlo Conti Rossini’s³⁷ pioneering works) without any substantial additional contribution.

Instances of this attitude can be found in the weekly English magazine *Eritrea Profile* as well as in many issues of the newspaper *Haddas Yertra* which, in their cultural pages, would often have a section on Eritrean cultures and traditions. Flicking through those pages the reader can easily detect that quite often they are just plain unquoted translations from Pollera’s major semi-ethnographic work *Le popolazioni indigene dell’Eritrea*,³⁸ published in 1935, with all the dust and incrustations of its colonial biases and stereotypes. In other words, all too often those pages speak about something that has not been really substantiated and thus hang on old-fashioned and often unacceptable colonial representations of Eritrean diversity and by so doing perpetuate within Eritrean communities the stereotypes and racial biases developed by the former colonial rulers.

Similarly, Eritrean nationalist narratives have built a Pantheon of founding fathers of the nation that are presented as iconic models to the young generations. Again, very little historiographic work has been done to study in depth the life stories, social background, education and political fortune of many of those figures. They are just assumed to be the uncritical and rather zealous object of national reverence with little room for any serious doubt or criticism about their real life story and their political agendas.

A case in point is Hamid Idris Awate, totemic father of the Eritrean liberation struggle acknowledged by all liberation movements in Eritrea as one of the

35 On these issues a crucial reading remains Fouad Makki “The Aporias of Eritrean Nationalism” in Hartmut Quehl (ed.) *Living In War Times, Living In Postwar Times*, Felsburg, Edition Eins, 2002

36 On Pollera ethnographic work a crucial reference is Sorgoni, B. *Etnografia e colonialismo. L’Eritrea e l’Etiopia di Alberto Pollera (1873-1939)*, Torino, Bollati Boringheri, 2001.

37 A precious guide to Carlo Conti Rossini’s huge production is Nallino, M. “Bibliografia degli scritti di Carlo Conti Rossini” in *Oriente Moderno*, vol. 29, n. 7-9, 1949, pp. 103-112.

38 Pollera, A. *Le popolazioni indigene dell’Eritrea*, Bologna, Cappelli, 1935.

pioneers of Eritrean nationalism. In fact, it would have been him the one who shot the first bullet against Ethiopian forces on September 1st, 1961 which marked the beginning of the protracted armed struggle against Ethiopian oppression in Eritrea. All Eritrean history text-books as well as political publications would agree on that and take it for indisputable historical truth. However, very little research has been carried out, up to now, on Idriss Awate's life and on his political views and perception of nationalism.

To this regard, it has been enlightening to follow the vitriolic debate flared recently among members of the Eritrea's National Council, an umbrella organisation coordinating different Eritrean opposition groups, after a member questioned the iconic figure of Idris Awate. Interestingly enough, Kornelios Adolay Osman, the highly controversial chairman of the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of the Eritrean Kunama (DMLEK or, in its Kunama version the "Kunama Koibisha Dimokratika Sungada") a Kunama based opposition group, challenged this picture saying that Idris Awate has committed many atrocities against the Kunama people based on ethnic hatred and, therefore, has labelled him as a criminal. What is more interesting is that the leaders of the Eritrea's National Council reacted rabidly, calling for the expulsion of Kornelios Adolay Osman from the Eritrea's National Council to later change this request into the suspension of the membership of the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of the Eritrean Kunama (DMLEK) and its chairman, Kornelios Adolay Osman. In other words, all otherwise often litigious and factious opposition groups coalesced without hesitation to protect the aura surrounding Idris Awate.

However, what really speaks volumes is the argument used to justify such a dramatic disciplinary action. In fact, the main charge was that Kornelios Adolay would have smeared the name of a hero and martyr that died for the cause of Eritrean independence and this, of course, was sanctioned as simply unacceptable. Apparently, nobody among the leadership of the coalition bothered to counter Kornelios Adolay statements with factual evidences and opposite arguments³⁹. On the opposite many web-sites state posting analogous charges of atrocities

39 Historical evidences of Idris Awate involvement in ethnic-based feuds can be found in Naty, A. "Environment, Society and the State in Western Eritrea" in *Africa* [London], vol. 72, n. 4, 2002, pp. 569-597 and in Lussier, D. "Local prohibitions, memory and political judgment among the Kunama: an Eritrean case study" in Fukui, K. *et al.* (eds.) *Ethiopia in broader perspective: papers of the XIIIth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Kyoto, 12-17 December 1997*, vol. 2, pp. 441-455. In a broader perspective new insights on the study of political violence in Africa can be found in Abbink, J.; de Bruijn, M.; Van Walraven, K. (eds.) *Rethinking resistance: revolt and violence in African history*, Leiden, the Netherlands; Boston, Brill, 2003.

attributed to the above mentioned Kornelios Adolay⁴⁰. Having this debate going on among opposition forces based abroad, and therefore not being subject to the fear and anxiety of the heavy handed intervention of Eritrean security forces one cannot help but thinking that this zealous approach toward the Eritrean past and its main actors is so deeply entrenched into the Eritrean political culture that major historiographic change need to be made in term of research themes and methodologies. It is in fact really puzzling the idea that one of the characters enhanced to the status of icon of Eritrean nationalism could be considered by a segment (no matter how much a minority could it be) of the Eritrean population as a war criminal. This by itself is evidence of some flaws in the allegedly inclusive project of nation-building developed both by Eritrean Government and opposition.

5. Emerging themes and areas of investigation

Possible new approaches for the development of a more dynamic and inclusive Eritrean historiography can be found in the study of social and territorial mobility. It seems to me that a focus on the notion of territorial and social mobility has a great hermeneutic potential, as it provides more opportunities to understand the complex layers of interactions between the different sections of the Eritrean society. This is particularly true with reference to the colonial context, as the study of mobility enable the researcher to shed light on the grey areas of the colonial world, highlighting the dimension of interaction and breaking the vicious circles of nationalist or defensive discourses on colonialism. Of course, social and territorial mobility can be divided for analytical purposes but in reality it is quite difficult to differentiate them neatly, as they are often tied in a very intricate interplay. In fact, territorial mobility is often instrumental in facilitating social mobility as well as the quest for social mobility often pushes to strategies of territorial dislocation.

The study of social and territorial mobility implies a more holistic approach which goes beyond the restrictive perspective of the conventional attention given to colonial violence and its repressive and exploitative policies, to pay due attention to the strategies and initiatives set in motion by colonial subjects in order to achieve emancipation and climb the social ladder. In other words shifting the focus from the exploitative and repressive policies of the colonial authorities to the developing strategies implemented by the colonial subjects to outsmart the colonial rule and find their own way through it, basically means adequately acknowledging the relevance of the African agency.

40 See for instance reports posted on <http://www.deqebat.com/Dmleks_%20Leader.html> or <<http://erigazette.org/?p=3803>>.

Within the broader notion of social mobility during the colonial time, more specific fields of investigation can be identified in the study of education and of colonial troops. Up to now, in the study of education, during the colonial period, a great deal of attention has been paid to extremely restrictive and segregated nature of Italian Educational policies. However, this approach has failed to provide adequate understanding of the impact that colonial education and its operational procedure had on Eritrean societies. Moreover, the emphasis on the discriminatory nature of the colonial educational system does not help in understanding the foundations of the vibrant and dynamic intellectual debate going on among Eritrean elites in the early Forties⁴¹. Again, this kind of approach does not pay justice to the relentless and creative role played by the Eritrean agency, in spite of the repressive colonial system. It is therefore necessary to assess how education affected different social groups and communities, how much we can identify a gender, religious or ethnic divide within this process. Moreover it is crucial to assess what role Eritrean subjects were able to make of the little access to education they gained under the colonial rule.

Similarly, the study of colonial troops can be seen as both instances of social and territorial mobility. Social mobility is to be found in the fact that the colonial army offered a unique opportunity to improve the social status of the drafted soldiers and their families. Territorial mobility is to be found in the fact that conscription in the colonial army fostered processes of mobility from rural to urban areas as well as from different regions, even from outside the colonial borders of colonial Eritrea. An aspect not enough analysed is that colonialism made Eritrea a land of immigration for migrant labour in form of colonial troops, rural labour, urban workers in the domestic sector or in the unskilled sector. This contributed in making the notion of Eritreanness even more complex and substantially *metis*.

Finally another important area of investigation which emerges as in great need of further developments is that of borderlands. The study of borderlands has witnessed a great and fast developments in recent years and has played a crucial role in shedding new light on otherwise little understood aspects of the interplay among African societies⁴². There is an urgent need to assess and locate “historiographically” Eritrean borderlands, to be seen not in relation to the central state but in their inner dynamics and autonomous proactive role. This would

41 See on this topic the crucial contribution of Alemseged Tesfai *Aynəfālälä* [Let us not be divided] Asmara, Hidri Publishers, 2002.

42 A seminal work in this direction is Nugent P. and Anthony I. Asiwaju (eds.) *African Boundaries: Barriers, Conduits and Opportunities* London, Frances Pinter, 1996.

enable the study of communities such as the Afar the Kunama and the Beni Amer escaping from the unsustainable temptation to read their history only from the limited perspective of the Eritrean statehood.

6. Conclusions

As a conclusion it seems to me that the present dire situation of Eritrea calls for a deep and creative engagement of its people including its intellectuals. To this regard intellectuals bear the heavy responsibility of being able to envision, through their researches, new and free perspectives that can hopefully feed the realm of politics, without fearing the lack of support (or even retaliations) from the power that be.

To this regard I strongly believe in the stringent actuality of the words of the Italian writer Elio Vittorini who, in an intense correspondence with the then leader of the Italian Communist Party Palmiro Togliatti on the relationship between politics and culture stated that the revolutionary writer is not the one who play the pipe for the the revolution, but rather the one who

through its work is able to rise revolutionary issues different from the one that politics rises; inner, secret, recondite needs of human beings that only he can detect in human beings, that it is exactly typical of him writer to detect and it is typical of him to rise, and rise beside the needs risen by politics, to rise in addition to the need risen by politics⁴³.

Vittorini labeled the intellectuals who accepted to play the pipe for the power that be as *arcadians*. I guess we do not want to be labeled as *arcadians* by our readers and descendants.

43 Translation mine, in the much more effective Italian original: «Rivoluzionario è lo scrittore che riesce a porre attraverso la sua opera esigenze rivoluzionarie *diverse* da quelle che la politica pone; esigenze interne, segrete, recondite dell'uomo *ch'egli soltanto sa scorgere nell'uomo, che è proprio di lui scrittore scorgere, e che è proprio di lui scrittore rivoluzionario porre, e porre accanto* alle esigenze che pone la politica, porre in più delle esigenze che pone la politican, Vittorini, E. "Politica e Cultura. Lettera a Togliatti" in *Il Politecnico*, vol. 35, n. 3, 1947, pp. 2-3; 105-106.