

Review

Dynamics of Ethio-Eritrean distinct identity under the historical prism

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Civil strife continues to engulf the continent of Africa with devastating political effects. Countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Rwanda, Sudan and Somalia have suffered recurrent civil wars over the past three decades. Towards the end of the twentieth century, Africa experienced a surge of ethnic conflicts. Ethnic identity continues to be a potent force in contemporary politics as it was in the colonial era. It has been established that Africa's ethnic disturbances have occurred more within national borders, thus giving rise to unstable domestic systems. These conflicts mostly arise out of disagreements over a plethora of issues including land, chieftaincy, resource allocation and environmental issues. The purpose of this paper is, thus, to present some critical issues related to the contentious debate on the Ethio-Eritrean historiography. The Ethiopianist's assertion of the Ethiopianness of Eritreans and the counter colonialist thesis of Eritrean nationalist have been studied under two divergent schools of thought that have produced multifarious ramification on the historiography of the states. The researchers contend that the root of this divergence is the intellectual dependency of the post-colonial scholars of the region on the colonial knowledge fabric about the state which, in turn, is worsened by the politicized historical socialization spearheaded by both the Ethiopianist and Eritrean nationalists. Thus, the divergence is rested on the failure of the intellectuals of the region in rediscovering or revisiting the diverse interconnections among the people coming out of the territory with centric colonial mentality transplanted towards Africa during the colonial conquest. Thus, this paper tries to depict the tides of such mind set.

Key words: Ethio-Eritrean historiography, intellectual dependency, political socialization.

INTRODUCTION

The relation of the people of Eritrea with Ethiopia is not confined to the political aspect. Not only are the two people joined by culture, geography and language, but historically the Adoulis heritage shows that the other Ethiopian (ethnic groups) originated from Eritrea. Throughout Ethiopia's long record as an independent entity, Eritrea was separated from us for only 60 years and even if we were separated by political and artificial barriers during this short span of time, we were unseparated in our way of life and mutual feeling.¹

Prior to the 1880s, the Eritrean high land has been part of the Ethiopian empire state. It has been sharing common language, religion, culture and historical experience with the Tigray proper south of the *Mereb* River (Alemseged, 1998: 180). However, the low land was either a buffer zone or an area of bone of contention.

Hamburg/Germany: Institute of African Affairs at GIGA, Africa Spectrum, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1977): 38 accessed 26/07/2013)

¹Emperor Haile Selassie's speech made at the occasion of his visit to Eritrea on 27 June 1962 (ZdenekCervenka, Eritrea: Struggle for Self-Determination or Secession?,

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According to Prof. Negussay, the analysis of the Eritrean issues in comparison with Ethiopia went on through four distinctive historical land marks namely: the period of the Italian and British Occupation of Eritrea, the period when UN sanctioned the federation of the Eritrean „unit“ with Ethiopia, the period of Ethiopian-Eritrean Union and the period of Eritrean secession from Ethiopia (Negussay, 2000: 1).

The search for the root cause of conflicts in Africa has led to the formulation of a plethora of theories to explain the root causes of the phenomenon. One of the theories traces the causes of ethnic conflicts in Africa to the colonial policy that forcibly agglomerated people of diverse ethnic backgrounds into one nation and the “exploitation of the colonialists which compounded the already strained inter-ethnic relations.” Bailey (1994), Suberu (2003) and Okwudiba(1998) are some of the proponents of this school.

PROCEDURE

This paper tried to analyze the dynamics of the Eritrean question under the historical prism. For this end, the researchers virtually stuck to secondary sources which had been produced by different scholars at different points in time. Therefore, what made this article different from the hitherto published works is the interpretation and extrapolation approach which focuses on reconstructing new premises by negating the intellectual dependence of political and academic elites on the conception of state.

TRIGGERERS FOR THE RISE OF ERITREAN NATIONALISM

The early foreign intrusion and the advent of colonial rule that procures a foothold in *Assab* under the guise of missionary service has created the divide line which was later complicated by the internal contention for the control of the political power between *Shewa and Tigray*. However, the former was primal in shaping the nature and the course of the later. Thus, the external colonial intrusion and the internal power struggle have laid down the foundation for the rise of separatist mentality and quest of secession among the Eritreans who were sandwiched within.

This study analyzes how the onset of European colonialism laid the foundation for separate mindset that views the mother state as „dependent colonial power“ and thereof the movement for separation. When European powers scrambled territories in Africa and set out to establish stations for their ships in North East African coast after the opening of the Suez Canal, Italy invaded Eritrea.

On 1 January 1890, it officially declared Eritrea as part of its North East African Colonies. The failure of the people both North and South of the *Mereb* to defend this imperialist conquest of Italy generated paradoxes on the Ethiopianist’s assertion of the Ethiopianness of Eritreans and as well the non - colonized sovereign history of

Ethiopia. Therefore, if the Eritreans claimed to be Ethiopians, it is mandatory to accept the colonization of Ethiopia or vice-versa. Hence, either of the two arguments must be incorrect and ahistorical. In this regard, even the victory of Adwa which is most often referred to as unifying episode became hollow and divisive for it failed to liberate people from the north of the *Mereb*.

THE COMPLEX DECOLONIZATION PROCESS OF ERITREA

Following the conclusion of World War Two (WWII), the council of victorious powers mainly Britain, France, Russia and USA hold a discussion to decide up on the disposition of the ex-Italian colonies. However, due to the uncompromised interest of the participants and the amalgam of other exogenous forces operating in it along with the antithetical aspirations of Eritreans themselves, the decolonization process of Eritrea was complicated (Othman, 1974: 82).

The discussants issued different proposals, that is, partitioning it between Ethiopia and Sudan, returning back to Italian trusteeship under the supervision of UN and federating with Ethiopia which has reclaimed as its mother country (Araya, 1988: 10). However, Britain was determined to partition Eritrea along religious lines. Thus, they designed a policy of *Bevin* which effaced out Eritrea from the global political map by dividing it into two. Accordingly, the three Islamic provinces of *Akordat*, *Nakfa*, and *Keren* were proposed to be incorporated into Sudan and on the other hand, the Eritrean plateau and the coast including *Asmara*, *Massawa* and *Assab* were planned to be integrated with Ethiopia (Othman, 1974: 207). Therefore, this plan was made with an attempt to obliterate the colonial political map and Eritrean’s existence as a viable political entity. While Italy in the 1930s conceived greater Eritrea by incorporating it with Tigray as part of the provinces of Italian East Africa (*Africa Orientale Italiana*), Britain laid the foundation of greater Tigray (Bahru, 2008: 367).

In this regard, *Bereket*, the architect of the post 1993 Eritrean dustbin constitution, and as well as *Semer* argue that the British Bevin plan was the second best option for the Ethiopian aspiration of restoring Eritrea (Semere, 1988: 30-31). However, Ethiopianist discard this notion on account that both Ethiopia and unionist party of Eritrea were consistently acting in opposition to the plan (Bereket, 1986: 84). The proposal of Italian trusteeship as noted by Shumet was aggressively challenged by Eritreans though Trevaski attributes the root of the challenge to the British disagreement on the proposal of granting Italy a position of trusteeship (Trevaski, 1960: 85).

When the four point commission failed to find all rounded and satisfying solution for the liquidation of Eritrea, the case was transferred to the General Assembly of the United Nations (Bahru, 2002: 183). On

the basis of Article II of the Paris Peace Treaty, which stipulates that „if the four states could not reach an agreement on the liquidation of any of [Italian colonial territories] within a year of implementing the peace treaty with Italy, then the matter would be referred to the General Assembly of the United Nations to make recommendation concerning it, and the four states agree to accept the recommendation and to take the necessary measures to implement it (Othman, 1974: 215). Then, the UN assigned five men from Guatemala, Norway, Pakistan, South Africa and Burma to conduct a need assessment about the interests of the peoples of Eritrea. After a rigorous assessment, still unanimity was impossible and three options were presented to the UN. Guatemala and Pakistan recommended guaranteeing independence whereas Burma and South Africa called for federation. Norway alone recommended union (Bahru, 2002: 183). The result of this investigatory process reflects each country’s diplomatic and religious affinity either with Ethiopia or Eritrea in lieu of declaring the true will of the populace.² In spite of this lacuna, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 390V on 2 December 1950. Accordingly, Eritrea became an autonomous unit federated with the Ethiopian crown (Bahru, 2002: 183).

THE ADOPTION AND DISSOLUTION OF THE FEDERATION

Historians are not unanimous with a single and definite point in explaining the rationale for adopting the federal formula for addressing the decolonization complexities of Eritrea. Some historians like *Bahru* argue that the federation was a compromise and golden mean of antithetical and irreconcilable interests of the separatist and unionists (Ibid). According to him, under the then condition the federal formula was the best of all alternatives in spite of the hard line advocacy of external powers. This view is completely ruled out by *Yohannes* who rather argues about the predisposition of the federation towards the unionists (Ibid).

He further consolidates his argument by exemplifying the conflict between the unionist and the separatist after the resolution. In fact, neither the separatist nor the unionist was satisfied with the resolution. The author contends that the total democratization of the pre-colonial Eritrean-Ethiopian state with social action was the way forward than being an instrument of foreign interest with the guise of the „golden mean.“

Due to this situation, some others believe that the federation was foreign imposition dictated by the interests

of Britain and USA. Generally, the federal act was put into effect on 15 September, 1952 and culminated with the gradual incorporation of Eritrea that was finalized on 14 November 1962 following the dissolution of it by members of the Eritrean Assembly (Semere, 1988: 43).

There is no accord among scholars in explaining the culmination of the federation as in its adoption. However, there are judgmental and multifarious disclosures given by different historians. Paul Henz emphasizes on the obsolescence and proliferation of its dysfunctions as the main factor that brought about the dissolution of the federal act (Gilbert, 1962: 1), whereas Tekeste attributes it to the actions and aspirations of the Eritreans (Takeste, 1997: 147). Conversely, many Eritrean nationalist scholars claim that the dissolution was a unilateral act taken by Ethiopian emperor who indulged himself in illegal task of rectifying Eritrean constitution to make the federation compatible with the incompatible imperial monarchical system (Yohannes, 1988: 194).

THE SEPRATIST MOVEMENT AND THE SECESSION OF ERITREA

Many scholars believe that it was the dissolution of the federation by the imperial government of Ethiopia and the deteriorating situation that gradually and inevitably led to an armed confrontation and full-fledged movement aiming at the complete independence of Eritrea. This argument bases itself on the remedial right theory of secession. According to this theory, secession right is a right that a group exercises it only as a result of violations of other rights. Thus, the right to unilateral secession is not primary but derivative upon the violation of more basic rights. Therefore, secession is justified only as a remedy of last resort for serious injustices and tyranny (Ibid: 36). Moreover, remedial right only theories allow that there can be special rights to secede if the state grants a right to secede implicitly or explicitly in its constitution or if the agreement by which the state was initially created out of previously independent political units included the assumption that secession at a later point was permissible. Different versions of remedial right only theories specify different lists of injustices that can ground the remedial right. The most common of this injustice includes large-scale and persistent violations of basic human rights, unjust taking of the territory of a legitimate state, the state’s persisting violation of agreements and to accord a minority group limited self-government within the state. This approach to secession recognizes at least two ways a group can have a valid claim to territory: by reclaiming territory over which they were sovereign but which was unjustly taken from them or by a claim to sovereignty over the territory as a result of availing themselves of a last resort remedy against serious and persistent violations of basic human rights.

In actual fact, it was a year before the dissolution of the federation that the Eritrean independence movement was formed. Thus, the author contends that instead of the

²This indicates the failure of the peoples of the two regions to solve their own problem by themselves and thereby handed over the issue for external powers who were hovering for dominating the region. Thus, the final resolution was carefully calculated time bomb that benefits neither.

dissolution of the federation, it was primarily instigated by the indifference of the leaders and the peoples residing south of the *Mereb* during the Italian occupation of *Mereb Melash* as a colonial protectorate that primarily triggers the separatist mindset which was later on manifested as armed insurrection.

The adoption of the federal act served as an excuse for the onset of the practical phase of the separatist insurgency. The ferment of insurgency was burning inside waiting only for a favorable time to burst out. Thus, to realize the aspiration of Eritreans for self-determination, the separatist movement broke out on the wake of the complete denial of self-rule and autonomy. The struggle to secure such right itself has also created the *we-they* divided and thereof birth of distinctive identity tainted with the blood of the martyrs.

When the imperial monarchy toppled out by the popular revolution, the insurgent groups of Eritrea got ample and conducive time to organize themselves and establish links with the populace and the rest part of the world. Besides, the post-revolutionary military junta has also perpetuated the forceful centralization and nation state building project. For such end, series of military operations were launched to curve the ferment of Eritrean Nationalism which was ingrained since the onset of the colonial conquest. However, in spite of the mammoth military capacity of the regime, most of the operations were crack down by the relentless resistance of the later.

Ultimately, Eritrean People Liberation Front (EPLF) under joint military operation with Tigrian People Liberation Front (TPLF) toppled down the military regime in 1991 and Eritrea attained the long awaited right of self-determination by dint of its power. It was at this historical episode that the Machiavellistic state of Ethiopia was legally amputated and the new Ethiopia born out of its ruins. Thus, though Eritreans assured their independence in 1991 by dint of their power, in 1993 following UN supervised symbolic referendum, the Eritrean people confirmed their independence. However, today there is still a debate in regard to the legality of the birth of Eritrea as an independent sovereign state. Most of the opposition parties and Ethiopianists argue on the basis of the pan-Ethiopian irredentism and they recurrently blame the post 1991 Ethiopian government for the secession of Eritrea.

This contentious debate and state of confusion is basically crafted by the colonialist state engineering and the concomitant intellectual dependency³ of both schools of thought.

The second theory of the root causes of conflicts in Africa sees conflict as an intrinsic phenomenon of the

³ Many scholars such as Zdenek have been painting a unique and off course progressive color to the people of Eritrean whereas the people south of *Mereb* were referred as having similar life style with the old testament patriarchs (Červenka, 1977: 37-38)

multi-ethnic nature of African states. The proponents argue that colonial powers failed to transform the disparate ethnic groups into an integrated and consolidated polity; they failed to divest themselves of all the nuances of ethnicity or "tribalism". This has denied the state unfettered use of its coercive power to freeze inter-ethnic conflicts. Some of its proponents are Cocodia and Rothchid (Cocodia, 2008: 910-930).

It was the advent of colonialism that imposed on the nation state concept and the strict observance of national boundaries on the political map of the continent. Contrary to the colonial arbitrary dismemberment process (Ottaway, 1982:20) which gave little or no regard for the preexisting cultural, linguistic, historical, ethnic identities and geographical consideration in setting the borders of their respective spheres of influence, nation states were prescribed to the peoples of the Horn of Africa (HOA) as a manifestation of their modernity as their colonizing masters (Ottaway, 1982: 20; Othman, 1974: 203).

The rigid territory centric political entities crafted by the colonial masters have produced pervasive historiographical tensions (Ottaway, 1982: 15). As it is vividly articulated by Clapham, the process that shaped state formation in Europe was completely different from what had been pivotal in Africa. According to him, in Europe it was the internal war, the bureaucratization and the formation of imagined community that shaped the emergence of nation states where as in Africa it was the external conquest of the imperialist power that led its foundation (Clapham, 2000: 3). This is also consolidated by the description of Chiriyen Kandath which he noted as " ... our vanishing (colonial) empire has left behind it a large heritage of history which is loaded with bequests good, bad and indifferent" (Perham, 1963: 18 cited in James, 37).

Due to this colonial counterfeit, the post-colonial states in the horn of Africa remained being territory centric and territories began to serve as authentic markers of social identity. This marked a great departure from the pre-colonial modes of social organizations and identification of the African society (Ottaway, 1982: 20) whereby none territorial designators of identity such as family, kinship, religion, tribe and clan ties have been playing central role. The most vivid instance for such a case is a wandering tribe whose authority structure is completely disassociated from a fixed loyalty to a particular piece of land as we witness it among wondering Somali pastoralist and as well in the „no man"s land" of refuges (Abdalla, 1995: 117-122).

From the vantage point of the contemporary knowledge fabric, it is hard to imagine how western Europeans colonized the mind and produced intellectual dependency using their own mode of thinking and knowledge system that blurred the self-definitions of African identity. Thus, out of their cartographic exercise they introduced the concept of nation state and as well codified laws that govern interstate relations. This indicates that the identity which we bear today has its root in the colonial fabrics. Even in

the post-colonial period, due to the absence of absolute agency, the ghosts of colonialism continues to haunt the march back to the pre-colonial past whereby the society moves without strict confinement as the rivers do.

CONCLUSION

It is the dependence on the territory and euro centric westphalian model of state that blurred discussions about interconnections and shared values between the Trans *Mereb* brothers of Eritrea and Ethiopia. Thus, the contentious debate and state of confusion perused by the Ethiopianist and Eritrean nationalist is basically crafted by the colonialist state engineering and the concomitant intellectual dependency of both schools of thought on such premises. Therefore, the beginning of colonial rule that procures a foothold in *Assab* under the guise of missionary service has created a historic divide line which is later complicated with the internal contention for the control of the political power. The failure of the peoples both North and South of the *Mereb* to defend this imperialist conquest of Italy generated paradoxes on the Ethiopianist's assertion of the Ethiopianness of Eritreans and as well the none-colonized sovereign history of Ethiopia.

Though the remedial theorists attribute the separatist movement to the dissolution of the federal act, in actual fact it was a year before the dissolution of the federation that the Eritrean independence movement was formed. Thus, the author contends that instead of the dissolution of the federation, the indifference of the leaders and the peoples residing south of the *Mereb* during the Italian occupation of *Mereb Melash* as a colonial protectorate primarily triggers the separatist mindset which later on manifested as an armed insurrection. Hence, the dissolution of the federal act served as an excuse for the onset of the practical phase of the separatist insurgency. The ferment of insurgency was burning inside waiting only favorable time to burst out. Thus, to realize the aspiration of Eritreans for self-determination, the separatist movement broke out on the wake of the complete denial of self-rule and autonomy. The struggle to secure such right itself has also created a rift and thereof for the birth of distinctive identity tainted with the blood of the martyrs. However, today there is a debate on the legality of the birth of Eritrea as an independent sovereign state. This contentious debate and state of confusion is basically crafted by the colonialist state engineering and the concomitant intellectual dependency of both schools of thought. It is the mind colonization which is the legacy of western European imperialism that had divided the brothers of the horn into divergent historiography at the very origin and of course the concomitant endogenous less accommodative mind set.

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