

HISTORY AND IDENTITY IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

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INVENTING THE PAST

The past is contested terrain. Selectively remembered or conveniently forgotten, sometimes invented, it can justify and legitimize present actions and may provide the model for a future to be created according to tradition. Not simply a sequence of completed events, the past can be seen as a creation of the present, with traditions invented to serve certain needs.¹ Some historians argue that there can be no neutral collection of historical facts and no single representative account of any given phenomenon.² Past, present and future are not distinct periods but part of an interactive, endlessly self-reflecting process of imagination. Nationalist historiography is part of an effort to create "imagined communities."³ Nationalist histories, in particular, tend toward a process of retrospective projection which defines the national self not as a created product of historical change but as the enduring and constant subject of history. Such histories typically involve the exclusion and silencing of certain voices and substitution of a hegemonic mythology. History gives legitimacy to those in power and in turn defines their self-conception. Attempts to rewrite history from the point of view of those excluded from power may be opposed or suppressed, sometimes violently. Sub-national entities cannot enforce their own histories, which are erased by the "history-writing-machine of the state."⁴

In the case of Ethiopia, competing narratives of history have been promoted by the state, by various opposition groups and by nationalist movements seeking independence. Those identifying themselves as Ethiopians, particularly those who identify with the Amhara culture which has exerted hegemony over others in the region, subscribe to a historical narrative which extends a unified territory and identity into the distant past. Other groups who live within Ethiopia's borders but reject Ethiopian affiliation and adopt

other identities, such as Eritreans and Oromos, offer different versions of regional history. They reject a unified national identity and challenge the vision of a continuously-existing Ethiopian state which has endured since antiquity. Various other political movements, whose members identify themselves as Ethiopians but who opposed the government of Mengistu Haile Mariam, have proposed their own narrative constructions of history which also challenge the hegemonic Amhara narrative. While offering conflicting or revised versions of the past, some propose that a unified but democratic Ethiopian state can meet the needs of all, regardless of identity. Such alternative narratives of history have been rejected by various Ethiopian regimes and by expatriate intellectuals who fled the country because of opposition to the government. Finally, discourse of Western intellectuals is informed by, and informs, these narratives of history. This essay examines the broad patterns of these narratives, the metaphors employed and their underlying assumptions. The contested nature and boundaries of the Ethiopian self point to broader questions about essential elements and boundaries of cultures and about authority to speak for cultural groups — questions central to a rethinking of several academic disciplines.⁵

THE NARRATIVE OF GREATER ETHIOPIA

The historical narrative of Greater Ethiopia (known as Abyssinia until the late nineteenth century) projects the existence of the present state backwards into time. For example, in an undated manifesto of ENATAD (the Ethiopian National Alliance to Advance Democracy, a monarchist group in exile), Prince Makonnen Makonnen states:

Ethiopia is an ancient land and one of a few whose history as a nation-state can be traced back to antiquity. The Egypt of the Pharaohs called it Punt, or the Land of God. Later, the Greeks thought of it as the land of wheat and of the olive tree, and much later in the Middle Ages, Ethiopia was perceived as a remote kingdom shrouded in legend and mystery, the land of "Prester John." It's [sic] borders covered most of the Horn of Africa and the western portion of the Arabian peninsula . . . For millennia, Ethiopians have preserved their independence and national integrity, and few countries over the centuries have so zealously protected themselves from foreign invasion . . .⁶

This discourse emphasizes the state's deep historical roots and continuity with the remote past. Ethiopian nationalists trace their history to the Axumite empire, which flourished from the first to the sixth centuries and was based in what is now Tigray. Weakened by Arab expansion, Axum fell under attacks from the Beja and

Agaw peoples, was succeeded by the Zagwe dynasty, and, according to this narrative construction of history, was restored in 1270 by a descendant of the single royal survivor of Axum. According to the *Kibra Negast*, the Tigrean text which Donald Levine regards as Ethiopia's national epic,⁷ the origins of the Amhara ruling elite are traced to the legendary union of King Solomon and Queen Sheba; their son, Menelik I, was the first in a line of divine kings extending to the last emperor, Haile Selassie, who was deposed by a military coup in 1974. Thus, continuity is a key theme in Ethiopian narrative constructions of history. This discourse proposes a fixed, enduring identity, deeply rooted in the ancient past. Antiquity confers authenticity upon this identity, regarded as essential and unchanging. Levine, promoting this continuity of identity, states that beliefs codified in the *Kibra Negast* "assured the Tigreans [of Axum] and their Amhara successors of superiority" and presented "imperial expansion . . . as a kind of manifest destiny."⁸ During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Amhara expanded from central Shoa to conquer new territories. In the sixteenth century, their power declined during the war against Ahmad Gran of Harar, who was supported by the expanding Turkish empire. With Portuguese support, the Amhara defeated Ahmad Gran's forces but their empire was weakened; this allowed the Oromo to expand from Bale region throughout most of what is now Ethiopia. A century of civil war (the "Era of the Princes") followed, as rival warlords struggled for power. In the mid-nineteenth century, under emperors Teodros, Yohannes and Menelik, Abyssinian force was reasserted and the foundations of the modern Ethiopian state were established. The narrative of Greater Ethiopia characterizes the military conquests of these emperors and their expansion of territory as reunification of the empire.

This empire resisted incursions by the Egyptians and the Italians, who had established a colony in Eritrea. At the battle of Adwa in 1896, Menelik's army defeated the Italians, a victory presented as preserving Ethiopian independence, while the rest of Africa fell to the European Scramble for Africa. Italy invaded in 1936 and controlled Ethiopia until 1941, when it was defeated by British and Ethiopian troops. In 1950, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia, although Haile Selassie campaigned for what he termed reunification of territory divided by Italian colonialism.

Ethiopian discourse asserts essential identity of the two regions. In an April 1, 1950 radio broadcast in Addis Ababa, during the visit of the UN Commission of Inquiry which was to determine the future of the former Italian colony, Haile Selassie claimed Eritreans had no separate identity as a people but were culturally and linguistically identical with Ethiopians, assertions echoed by Foreign Minister Aklilou Abte Wold. This exemplifies the

tendency of nationalist discourse to employ invented facts to further its claims: there are numerous mutually unintelligible languages in Eritrea, as there are in Ethiopia, a fact noted by the UN Commission in its report.⁹

Ethiopian nationalist discourse constructs Eritrea as inauthentic, as opposed to an essential Ethiopian identity. In 1950, Aklilou Abte Wold described Eritrea to the UN Commission as "an artificial entity. . . [requiring] artificial economic support."¹⁰ Deposition of the emperor did not modify Ethiopian discourse. Emphasizing continuity of the ancient Ethiopian state, Mengistu also dismissed Eritrea as "an artificial Italian-made entity."¹¹ External discourse, too, adopts these terms; for example, Paul Henze, former CIA Station Chief in Ethiopia, concurs with Israeli historian Haggai Erlich's view of Eritrea as "an artificial creation of European imperialism."¹²

This formulation, contrasting essence to artifice, is problematic, however. In its appeal to essential identity, it ignores the African context, in which all contemporary states are "artificial creations" of imperialism. Eritrean nationalists assert the similarity of Eritrea's colonial experience with that of other now-independent states, and appeal to the OAU resolution on observance of borders inherited from the colonial period. However, this appeal received no open support and the OAU, based in Addis Ababa, avoided the issue.

Following steady erosion of rights guaranteed by the federation arrangement, Eritrean nationalists launched armed revolt against Ethiopia in 1961. The Ethiopian nationalist narrative depicts this as secessionism, inspired and encouraged by Arab states seeking to fragment Ethiopia and turn the Red Sea into an "Arab lake." Efforts to crush Eritrean independence were presented as defense of an ancient Christian outpost encircled by hostile Muslim forces. Much like official Israeli discourse on the Palestinian issue, Ethiopian discourse rejects the idea of a distinct national identity among Eritreans.

The historical narrative constructed by Ethiopian nationalists states that in 1962 the Eritrean Assembly voted to dissolve the UN federation and become fully reintegrated as a province of Ethiopia. Eritreans challenge this, stating that Ethiopian authorities coerced the vote, or that no vote took place and that representatives of the Ethiopian Crown simply read out a declaration. Some Ethiopian nationalists dispute this, and argue that Eritrean issues legitimately became an internal concern of the Ethiopian government; others acknowledge irregularities but believe that the two regions should remain united due to historical and cultural links.

In the 1970s, the military regime (known as the Derg in Amharic) intensified the war against Eritrea, first with United States arms and then, following its adoption of Marxist-Leninist

rhetoric, supported by the Soviet Union. From the 1950s to the mid-1970s, Ethiopia had been presented as a pro-Western, modernizing nation with a benevolent and progressive ruler; by the 1980s, however, it was reviled as a communist dictatorship. Regardless of ideological shifts, Ethiopia's "territorial integrity" was deemed inviolable and essential in discourses of both superpowers, which agreed that political problems and ethnic inequalities must be solved within a unified state. This position was shared by various opposition groups which attacked the Derg from a Marxist-Leninist perspective or sought restoration of the monarchy.

THE NARRATIVE OF ERITREAN INDEPENDENCE

Eritrean nationalists trace the origin of their separate identity to Italian colonialism. Previously, parts of the region did interact with Abyssinian kingdoms, but Eritreans claim that no Abyssinian king ruled the whole territory, and that occupation by the Turks and Egyptians contributed to development of a separate regional history. However, it was Italian colonization which unified Eritrea, transformed the area's social and economic character and defined it as a distinct unit in 1889. Thus, Eritreans argue that colonialism established the foundations of a national unit and that Eritrean identity is premised on the same experience of colonialism as that of other African states. Whereas the Ethiopian narrative sees Italian colonialism as merely a temporary, artificial interruption of a pre-existing cultural and territorial unity, Eritrean nationalism regards it as a definitive break which established a distinct, shared identity among various groups who came under Italian domination. In contrast to the Ethiopian narrative with its rhetorical emphasis on continuity, essence and the remote past as validation of the present, the central theme of Eritrean nationalist discourse is a decisive rupture which created a new identity, authentic, legitimate and distinct. Whereas Ethiopian nationalism posits fixed transhistorical identity, Eritrean discourse sees identity shaped and modified by changing historical circumstances. Asserting a more subjective and malleable definition, Eritrean discourse challenges fundamental assumptions of the Ethiopian narrative construction of national identity.

Rather than reunification of a former coherent whole, Eritrean nationalists see incorporation within Ethiopia as an unresolved colonial issue; doubly so, in fact, for not only was Eritrea denied the independence gained by other former colonies, but it became subject to Ethiopian colonialism. Eritreans argue this was not acknowledged because Ethiopia's government was a Black regime oppressing other Black people. They argue that simplistic and racist

definitions of colonialism, Haile Selassie's personal prestige, the OAU's base in Addis Ababa and hypocritical self-interest of other states, wary of encouraging secessionist movements elsewhere (regardless of different historical circumstances), deflected African support for their cause. Ethiopian opponents say the charge of Ethiopian colonialism is invalid because it has been made only since 1974, because Ethiopia was not industrialized and therefore could not be colonial, and because the definition of colonialism is subjective.¹³ In fact, Eritrean nationalists had referred to Ethiopian colonialism since 1950.¹⁴ With the adoption of Marxist-Leninist rhetoric by most protagonists in the 1970s, however, interpretation of the Eritrean case as a national or colonial issue created intense debate, much of it directed towards proving a correspondence or lack of correspondence to prescriptions in texts by Lenin or Stalin. The thesis advanced by *Challenge*, the journal of the Ethiopian Students Union in North America, and by the Derg, argued that Ethiopian control of Eritrea was not colonial because Ethiopia was precapitalist; also, it was claimed that calls for self-determination were counter-revolutionary in Ethiopia under the Derg. Arguments of Ethiopian Marxists on the colonial question have been critiqued for their assumption of pure modes of production, reification of categories and mechanical application of terminology.¹⁵

Eritrean nationalist discourse presents federation as an imposition arranged to further the joint interests of the United States and its Ethiopian ally. Virtually every text arguing for Eritrean independence reproduces the 1952 speech made by John Foster Dulles, former U.S. Secretary of State, to the UN Security Council:

From the point of view of justice, the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic interest of the United States in the Red Sea basin and considerations of security and world peace make it necessary that the country has to be linked with our ally, Ethiopia.¹⁶

Originally, European powers favored a division of Eritrea which would have united part of the colony with Sudan, and part with Ethiopia. All Eritrean political parties rejected this, regardless of their position on independence or unification with Ethiopia. Most Eritrean Muslims favored independence while the Unionist Party, seeking integration with Ethiopia, gained most of its support from the highland Christian population. Conceptualizing a strict division of political opinion along religious lines, however, oversimplifies the situation, as many prominent leaders in the independence movement were Christians from the highlands. Similarly, the chairman of the delegation of the Muslim League, speaking to the United Nations in 1950, explicitly stated that he

was speaking for Christian members of the Independence Bloc, as well as Muslims, in rejecting the "occupational yoke" of Ethiopia.¹⁷ Ethiopian nationalists, such as Mesfin Araya,¹⁸ overlook this in order to argue that the existence of religious divisions means there was no sense of national unity in Eritrea, but only an idea of a state formed along religious lines.

Eritrean independence was not in the interests of external powers. The United States sought control of a strategic communications base in the Eritrean capital, Asmara, while Ethiopia wanted access to the sea. Araya suggests that both Eritrean and Ethiopian nationalists exaggerate external intervention to explain federation and the lack of a clear decision either for independence or unification.¹⁹ He argues that divisions within Eritrean society necessitated federation as a compromise. Certainly, these divisions existed, but it is clear that the United States did play a significant role in arranging the federation as a compromise, in its own interests and those of Ethiopia, against what it perceived as an overwhelming majority of opinion in favor of Eritrean independence.

Kifle Wodajo, a former Foreign Minister of the Ethiopian government, claims that "in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, there was in Eritrea a strong sentiment for union with Ethiopia."²⁰ In contrast, Eritrean nationalist discourse regards the Unionist Party as a creation of the Ethiopian government, which also used bribery, terrorism and threat of excommunication from the Orthodox Church to attain its expansionist aims. Whatever the degree of local support for unification, it is evident that Ethiopia funded the Unionist Party and employed coercive tactics.²¹ Federation was arranged by the UN in 1950; seeing it as a pretext for annexation, Ethiopia immediately violated the terms of the federation by banning language rights, political freedoms, and trade union activity in what had been intended as an autonomous Eritrea. Whereas Ethiopian discourse claims that Eritreans both approved of federation and then voted for its abolition a decade later to become fully reintegrated with Ethiopia, Eritrean nationalists argue that federation was first imposed against majority opinion, and later illegally abrogated so that Ethiopia could exercise direct control:

The mechanics were simple: the Eritrean assembly — many of whose members by this time were virtually handpicked — was pressured into accepting a speech from the throne that announced the federation was dissolved. The assembly was surrounded by units of armed forces and police, and there were machine guns inside the building when the "vote" was taken. Those who stayed away, or walked out in protest, were arrested and beaten.²²

The crucial events of regional history are thus interpreted in directly opposing ways by the protagonists.

Protests to the UN were ignored and an armed independence movement emerged in response to increasing Ethiopian repression. Following civil war created from ethnic, ideological and regional contradictions, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) was superseded by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). The EPLF declared a socialist orientation, and as its goal a referendum in which all Eritreans would vote on federation, independence or regional autonomy. Even after gaining control of Eritrea, and after the fall of the Mengistu regime in May 1991, the EPLF did not simply declare independence, but continued to advocate the referendum.

Eritrean nationalism has a more recent historical emphasis than Ethiopian nationalism, which stresses a "deep" history and the idea of a state existing for thousands of years. As noted, Eritrean identity is regarded as a product of the shared experience of colonial occupation, and Eritrean nationalist discourse has emphasized creation of an independent state in the future rather than concentrating on glories of the remote past. There are some attempts to refashion the distant past but these are exceptions, not a general tendency. Araya attacks Eritrean nationalist discourse for this very quality,²³ asserting that its modern emphasis and lack of historical symbols of unity signify illegitimacy. Araya, however, operating strictly within the parameters of Ethiopian nationalist discourse and insisting that nationalism is only legitimate if it employs symbols of an identity hallowed with age, misreads Eritrean nationalism. He not only overlooks symbols of antiquity where these do occur in Eritrean nationalist discourse, but also the fact that national identities are fluid and subjective; furthermore, his argument begs the question of what degree of antiquity is acceptable to offer this legitimizing quality.

THE RESURGENCE OF OROMO IDENTITY

The Oromo constitute approximately half of Ethiopia's population. Spread throughout the country, they are the largest group speaking a mutually intelligible language, Oromiffa, and sharing unique cultural traditions. Greater Ethiopian discourse relegates the Oromo to inferior status. Levine defines the contrast between the Amhara and the Oromo as one between hierarchical individualism and egalitarian collectivism.²⁶ Until very recently, the Oromo were known as the Galla, a term they do not apply to themselves and one which carries "overtones of race and slavery," as well as the imputation of a lack of civilization; according to myth, the Oromo were descendants of "a high-born Amhara lady and a slave."²⁷

Oromo nationalism contends that "the Oromo people have been enveloped by Ethiopian colonialism since the late nineteenth century," a matter which should be resolved by the establishment of an independent Oromo state, Oromia.²⁸ Under Amhara domination, Oromo culture was devalued and degraded, central cultural institutions, such as the gada system, were banned and even personal Oromo names were changed in favor of Amharic ones. Land was distributed to Amhara settlers and the Oromo became serfs. The Italian occupation undermined Amhara control, and some Oromo regarded this as liberation from Amhara domination. However, the British reimposed Amhara control by putting Haile Selassie back into power. Revolts followed in many Oromo regions, but were suppressed with British, Israeli and U.S. aid. When the Emperor was deposed, many Oromo hoped that the new government would rectify the oppressive features of the old regime. By 1976, however, the Oromo realized that the Derg did not intend to change essential relations of power, and in 1976 the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was created to fight for independence.

While Ethiopian discourse attempted to delegitimize Eritrean nationalism by arguing that Eritrea historically had been part of Ethiopia and that there is no distinct Eritrean identity, the Oromo have been excluded from historical discussion. Mohammed Hassen states that "Oromo history has been totally neglected" and that what does exist is conjectural and obscure.²⁹ He notes that the Oromo have typically been defined in negative terms by chroniclers of Christian Abyssinia and that Western historians, fascinated by the idea of a long-established Christian kingdom in the Horn, misrepresented regional history by promoting the hegemonic Amhara discourse and ignoring the "primitive" Oromo; Jordan Gebre-Medhin makes a related criticism,³⁰ charging that scholarly attention to Ethiopia has been constrained by a Great Tradition paradigm and that what amounts to an academic fetish has blocked investigation into peasant society.

Written as a corrective to the image of the "primitive" Oromo, Hassen's work discusses the great territorial expansion of Oromo peoples in the sixteenth century, following mutual destruction of the armies of Christian Abyssinia and the Muslim forces from Harar. Hassen describes the establishment of five independent Oromo states in the Gibe region during the nineteenth century and claims that outlines of other states were emerging elsewhere, but that these developments were interrupted by Menelik's conquests. This reinterpretation of history is not simply a reassessment of the past, but also a political intervention. Ethiopian nationalist discourse rejects the idea of an independent Oromo state as a fantastic and unworkable notion. This discourse contends that such a state never existed in the past and therefore cannot exist in the future. The EPLF and Ethiopian opposition parties, such as the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON), have accepted the Oromo

right to self-determination, apparently including the right to establish an independent state, but have also indicated a preference for resolution of the Oromo issue within the context of a unified, democratic Ethiopia. However, Oromo nationalism argues that an Oromo "area" was recognized by the Amhara rulers. Although Hassen's own text appeals for unity and equality within Ethiopia, his discussion of the nineteenth century Oromo states will likely provide support for calls for establishment of independent Oromia. Oromo nationalist discourse also attacks the image of Ethiopia as a long-unified state which survived European colonialism. Bonnie K. Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa argue that the European colonial powers supported the rise of Menelik to achieve their own aims,³¹ to establish a dependent colonial state in the region which would serve various imperialist powers. This thesis is advanced in explicit opposition to what the authors regard as received historical notions of Ethiopia as an exceptional African state which resisted colonialism. They maintain that European powers encouraged consolidation of an Ethiopian state because none could completely dominate the region, and the created entity could act as a buffer to prevent war and fragmentation, while still allowing access to resources and transport routes. As a dependent colonial state, Ethiopia was sustained and restructured according to European interests, which included extension of the Ethiopian state over other weaker regions. As do Eritrean nationalists, Oromos reject the restricted definitions of colonialism used by the Derg and Ethiopian intellectuals associated with *Challenge*, arguing that they allow Ethiopian discourse to cloak historical subjugation of other peoples:

Oromia is now a colony of Ethiopia. It is a colony because it has been conquered, and annexed by alien force. What does this mean exactly? It means that the occupying alien force, the Abyssinian colonial force, forcefully penetrated the country by military means, evicted the indigenous people, occupied the territory and built garrisons in the midst of the land. Once the conquest and occupation was accomplished, settlement was conducted from those garrisons which became subcenters for control. As settlement was carried out, institutions began to be developed, such as the legal system, the police, the courts, the school system and so on. Each one of these new institutions replaced specific functions of the indigenous Oromo socio-economic system known as Gada and its institutions . . . but toward different objectives. The replacement was the Neftegna-Gabbar system, which was a dependent colonial form of social organization that combined some Abyssinian and some European features.³²

This rewriting of historical processes in the region entails reconceptualization of events such as the battle of Adwa. Rather

than being a key symbolic event in African history, the triumph of Black Africans over a European colonial army, the event is reinterpreted as a proxy battle, an indirect confrontation between Britain and France. Similarly, the processes of modernization and centralization carried out by successive emperors since the mid-nineteenth century are reconceptualized as creations of European powers acting in their own interests. The emperors themselves, elevated to semi-divine status by the *Kibra Negast*, and hailed as progressive modernizers in Great Tradition scholarship, are dismissed as mere functionaries. Ethiopian resistance is redefined as collusion. Even the central historical claim of Ethiopian nationalist discourse, that Ethiopia is an ancient independent state, is here presented as an invention of European ideology, designed to support boundary claims and prevent expansion by rival powers.

THE TIGRAYAN STRUGGLE

Tigrayans, in northern Ethiopia, trace their descent from Axum. Edward Ullendorf regards the Tigrinya-speaking peoples of the highlands as "the authentic carriers of the historical and cultural traditions of ancient Abyssinia,"³³ and asserts a complete ethnic affinity on both sides of the Tigrayan-Eritrean border. While acknowledging use of the Tigrinya language in both Tigray and Eritrea, Eritrean nationalists claim that considerable cultural differences exist between the two regions.

Tigrayan nationalists dismiss the claims to cultural uniformity and territorial integrity of Ethiopia as "forced unity."³⁴ Rather than offering the culture area as an organic whole, this discourse uses the image of "a mismatch in a patch work which is either due to incompatible patterns or the use of materials with different textures."³⁵ Rejecting "natural continuity and evolution," Tigrayan nationalism offers a version of history as constituted by breaks and disruptions, conquests and subjugation;³⁶ in place of a continuously-existing state, Tigrayan nationalism constructs "Ethiopia" as an ever-changing entity, a signifier with a number of historically different referents. This discourse asserts that "Tigray, with parts of Eritrea, had a separate existence from antiquity to the time of the fall of Axum" and that therefore, there is no basis for referring to Axum as part of "Ethiopian" history: "The history of Axum is the history of Tigray and the southern part of Eritrea."³⁷

Tigrayan discourse argues that, following the defeat of the Zagwe king Ne-aukuto Le'ab in 1270, by Yikunno Amlak, supposedly a descendant of Axumite royalty and the founder of the Solomonid dynasty among the Amhara, there ensued centuries of warfare and only tenuous rule over areas conquered by the

Amhara. Apart from the payment of tribute, Tigray is presented as autonomous during this period. Following the destructive wars of the sixteenth century, "an upsurge of Oromo nationalism" caused the Amhara to retreat to Gondar, where they came under the authority of Tigrayan ruler Michael Sihul.³⁸

During the Era of the Princes, no unified state existed and the Abyssinian kings did not influence the internal affairs of Tigray. Tigray had been a rival for power with the Amhara, and the emperors Teodros and Yohannes were both from Tigray. Solomon claims that Menelik, king of Shoa, accepted Italian control of Eritrea and urged Italy to attack Yohannes, concluding:

It is a travesty of history that the Shoans who ceded Eritrea to Italy and recognized Assab as a colony purchased by Italy from the Sultan, should now be fighting to keep it as part of the empire.³⁹

After Yohannes' death, Menelik took power and "was determined to destroy Tigray."⁴⁰ During Menelik's reign, the region came under Shoan control and was deliberately impoverished and underdeveloped. A 1943 revolt, known as Weyane, was suppressed by Haile Selassie with the aid of the British air force. In 1975 the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was formed, and subsequently gained control over the region. Some TPLF supporters have called for the establishment of a separate state, but others believe that the Ethiopian state should be reorganized in a more democratic fashion.

Tigrayans consider themselves Ethiopian and worked for the establishment of a united front to overthrow the Derg and install a democratic government. However, several groups, particularly the OLF, remained wary, fearing TPLF attempts to dominate the front and any future government in order to further its own interests. The OLF criticized the TPLF for attempting to form its own organization among the Oromo; it regarded the TPLF's actions as constituting a sort of political ventriloquism, creating an organization it could manipulate for its own objectives, comparable to the earlier creation of the Oromo People's Democratic Movement and the Oromo People's Democratic Organization by the Ethiopian opposition movements, MEISON and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), respectively:

On the nature of the Ethiopian state, the OLF holds that it is an empire in which the conquered Oromo have the status of colonial subjects and that they are entitled to the right of self-determination, while the TPLF reckons Ethiopia from the conquest of the Oromo and thus opposed the OLF view . . . To the OLF the exercise of the right of self-determination is an inalienable right of our people, to the fulfillment of which our Front is

committed as a matter of priority and it holds that it is the Oromo people, and only the Oromo, who should determine its own political future. The TPLF found this unacceptable and insisted that the OLF set its priority along the TPLF lines and to work for "unity" of Ethiopia as determined by the TPLF.⁴¹

Polemical debates also existed between the EPLF and the TPLF over the issue of a united front and over the right of nationalities within Eritrea to form their own states.⁴²

This presents the broad outlines of a number of conflicting narratives of history and identity in Ethiopia, narratives which will structure the future of the Horn of Africa. These cases, however, do not exhaust the full array of such narratives. For example, nationalists among the Afar, who live in Eritrea, Ethiopia and Djibouti, have sought their own state, but other Afars think their interests would be better served within a unified Ethiopian state, while still others have engaged in joint operations with the EPLF against the Derg. The Ethiopian Government, in its 1976 National Democratic Revolution Program, resolved to create an autonomous Afar region, as well as autonomous areas in Tigray, Eritrea, an Amhara region and Oromo and Somali regions. These resolutions were never fully implemented and were rejected by the nationalist movements in Eritrea and Tigray. The EPLF saw the Derg's creation of an Afar region as an attempt to split Eritrea and weaken the drive for independence. The tactic was compared to the Derg's manipulation of ethnic divisions elsewhere in Eritrea, by attacking Nara villages but not those of the rival Kunama, who have sometimes assisted the Ethiopian military. The EPLF has argued that there is no case for the establishment of an Afar state, just as there should be no independent states formed in Tigray or by the Oromo.

IDENTITY AND HISTORY

James Clifford, witnessing a Boston court case attempting to determine claims to continuous tribal identity among the Mashpee Indians,⁴³ noted the existence of two competing histories. Similarly, although in a much more complex fashion, nationalism in the Horn is contested in conflicting versions of the past and in different discourses of identity. The terms of Greater Ethiopia discourse, the very basis of Ethiopian identity, are challenged by counter-discourses of Eritrean and Oromo nationalism and by some versions of Tigrayan and Afar nationalism. Several of these narratives are in direct opposition, each threatening the essential authenticity which is the central claim of the others. Concession or

compromise threatens a loss of essence and endangers the ideal of cultural authenticity. For example, Eritrean and Oromo nationalists do not wish to be incorporated within a broader Ethiopian identity, but the independence of Eritrea or Oromia is seen as a threat to the integrity of Ethiopia, an attempt to diminish and split the unity of the ancient state.

In particular, attempts to incorporate Eritrea within Ethiopia created a crisis of unity within Ethiopia itself,⁴⁴ and a questioning of national identity. Rejecting the claims of Eritrean nationalism, Ethiopians argue that the colonial interlude was too short to have had a lasting and deep effect on Eritrea.⁴⁵ However, Eritrean nationalists argue that the period of Italian colonialism is comparable to European occupation elsewhere, in areas which have now become independent, and that, despite Ethiopian claims to the contrary, colonial occupation did create fundamental changes in Eritrea.⁴⁶

Ethiopian nationalist discourse asserts complete cultural homogeneity between Eritreans and Ethiopians. This is an exaggeration, as there are several mutually unintelligible languages in Eritrea itself, as well as ethnic and religious differences. Assertion of shared cultural identity is part of a misreading of Eritrean nationalist discourse and an attempt to shift the basis of that nationalism from political to ethnic issues. If ethnic movements base their legitimacy on claims to a cultural distinctiveness, which marks them off from their neighbors, and make the case that the establishment of a separate state is necessary for the survival of those distinct cultural traits, then a demonstration of shared culture delegitimizes claims for independence. Ethiopian nationalists also argue that there is no distinct Eritrean identity because Eritrea itself incorporates different ethnic groups. In rejecting claims for ethnic distinctiveness and for independence based on such claims, some Ethiopian intellectuals argue that nationalism itself is a Eurocentric notion which must be rejected as a foreign ideology.⁴⁷ Yet, these characterizations of nationalism refer to ethnic nationalism rather than territorial nationalism,⁴⁸ and, thus, the argument misrepresents Eritrean claims. The Eritrean independence movement does not present itself as an ethnic movement but, instead, promotes a pan-ethnic national identity shared by all ethnic groups in Eritrea. Therefore, the Ethiopian attempt to negate the Eritrean ethnic self is misplaced, an attempt to refute a claim which in fact is not advanced by those to whom it is imputed. The Tigrayan and Oromo nationalist movements do have an ethnic dimension, although the former has moved through several phases of argumentation from an initial emphasis on the distinctiveness of Tigrayan identity to the need for an integrated, multicultural Ethiopia.

Ironically, Ethiopian nationalist discourse, having stressed the Ethiopian character of Eritrea in order to dismiss claims of ethnic distinction, itself conjures up such a distinction, by emphasizing the Arab character of the Eritreans, in order to delegitimize the independence movement from another perspective. In the discourse of Ethiopian nationalism, notably in a famous circular letter of 1891, issued by Menelik, which described Ethiopia as "a Christian island surrounded by a sea of pagans," Ethiopian identity is defined in religious terms and depicted as threatened by encircling Muslim cultures.⁴⁹ As part of the attempt to negate its validity, Eritrean nationalism is represented as an Arab-inspired attempt to destroy the integrity of the Christian state. Yet this creates a paradox: while Ethiopian nationalist texts stress that it is the alien, Arab character of Eritreans which causes them to wage secessionist war, this character must be simultaneously shown to be superficial so that Eritrea can be presented as having been an integral part of the state throughout history. The Arab dimension is consistently stressed so that Eritrean nationalism can be portrayed as invalid and, above all, "artificial," but it is also denied so as to preserve the idea of a national Ethiopian essence. Whereas Italian influences must be dismissed as superficial in order to reject Eritrean claims to a fundamental transformation and the creation of a new identity, Arab influence is stressed in order to show the inauthentic character of Eritrean nationalism, and to play upon Ethiopian fears concerning Muslim threats to Christian identity. Thus, there is a tension created in the discourse which simultaneously insists on the sameness and the difference of the Eritreans.

Similarly, racism and cultural arrogance shown towards the Oromo, long regarded as primitive, backward and inferior to the Amhara, are cloaked by assertions that Oromos are as fully accepted as Ethiopians, so that claims for a separate Oromia can be delegitimized. Here, the essential opposition is posed as order against chaos. In Amhara narrative constructions, victory over the Oromo is presented as the establishment of order. However, Oromo versions of the conquest portray it as the imposition of an alien culture. While several scholars emphasize the permeability of Amhara identity, the ease with which one can "pass" as Amhara by speaking Amharic and adopting an Amharic name, those whose cultures have been devalued emphasize power relations, the necessity to abandon one's own culture, and the inability for non-Amhara ever fully to succeed.

Whereas Ethiopian nationalism asserts essential similarities in the case of Eritrea, dismissing nationalist sentiments as alien and superficial impositions, the Oromo have been conceived as radically other. The Amhara have seen themselves as engaged upon a civilizing mission among primitive peoples; the Oromo have been

regarded as savage and warlike invaders, the obverse of the cultured Amhara. Levine argues that the Oromo (whom he calls Galla, applying the derogatory term they do not use for themselves) had no sense of unified identity as Oromos,⁵⁰ let alone as members of a multiethnic state, but rather that their loyalties were to their own particular "tribal" group or even to a particular unit within the gada system of age-grades.

Just as nations are assumed to go through stages comparable to periods in the life of individual people, nationalism is typically accompanied by assumptions of a characteristic personality type believed somehow to be associated with the nation itself.⁵¹ Various stereotypes of self and other occur. For example, one Oromo suggested that all Amhara are warlike and aggressive because they are beaten by their parents, whereas he described the Oromo as peace-loving and egalitarian — an inversion of the Amhara stereotype of the Oromo. Donald Donham notes derogatory Amhara proverbs about the Oromo;⁵² at least one of these ("Even if you wash them, stomach lining and a Galla will never come clean") is also used by Eritreans in reference to Amharas. Ethiopians may regard Eritreans as selfish troublemakers, while the latter describe the former as untrustworthy liars who are compulsively deceptive. Both David C. Korten⁵³ and Levine suggest that the Amhara personality is motivated by a strategy of self-advancement at the expense of others,⁵⁴ and that this personality type shows limited scope for cooperation and compromise. Some Amhara informants are enraged at such an assessment; others have agreed with it, but point out that aggressiveness is a necessity for survival in a harsh world. Quite apart from any validity in such generalizations, the point is that these discourses of national identity encourage the tendency of opponents to essentialize the other.

IMAGINING ETHIOPIA

Contrasting narrative constructions of history and competing versions of identity in the Horn of Africa have influenced and been influenced by foreign discourses. In turn, nationalists have seized upon these other discourses to legitimize and further their own claims. Examination of competing historical narratives used by Ethiopians and by those who reject Ethiopian identity cannot ignore Western images of Ethiopia and the significance which Ethiopia has had for other Africans. Ethiopian and foreign discourses have fed upon each other and have been formed in opposition or reaction to one another.

The term "Ethiopia" itself is resonant with multiple meanings. A Greek expression meaning "burnt-face," presumably referring to skin pigmentation, it is the oldest Western term for Africa. In *The Odyssey*, Ethiopians are termed the "most distant of men," living on the divide where the sun rises and sets. This image of Ethiopia as a remote region has persisted in the sense that it is regarded as belonging to another time, biblical or medieval, and fundamentally unknowable.⁵⁵ Both Christian and Muslim texts praised Ethiopia as a pious realm, although its location was variously confused with Nubia or even India. Ethiopia was known to medieval Europe as the kingdom of the legendary Prester John, whose assistance was looked to as a salvation from the impending Muslim threat. Racism and arguments for a civilizing mission in Africa by Europeans have also influenced Western thinking about Ethiopia.

Victory of Menelik's forces over Italian troops at Adwa in 1896, and reaction to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, contributed to the image of Ethiopia as a long-independent African civilization. Ethiopia became a potent signifier in the 1930s, particularly for other African nations and for African-Americans who saw in Ethiopia the mark of independence and pride. Before the Italian invasion, other Africans knew little of Ethiopia, but in the 1930s its fate became a cause celebre.⁵⁶ Concern for Ethiopia contributed to the growth of nationalism elsewhere in Africa, and leaders such as W.E.B DuBois and Edward Blyden stressed the antiquity of Ethiopia in order to promote pan-Africanist ideals.

The victory of Menelik's forces at Adwa overturned the assumptions of African powerlessness. The contrast with the established frame of reference for Africans in anthropological and racist discourses as primitives was so shocking that it required a reclassification of Ethiopians as White rather than Black people.⁵⁷ The Amhara ruling elites have emphasized their links to the Semitic cultures of the Arabian peninsula and have drawn a distinction between themselves and other Africans, portraying the Oromo and other southern peoples as more African and more primitive. Numerous scholars have commented on Ethiopian racism,⁵⁸ and one Ethiopian informant has stated that "Ethiopia is the most racist country in the world." Ironically, as European discourse reconceptualized the racial identity of Ethiopians, and as the ruling elites of the expanding Ethiopian state promoted a version of history which stressed their non-African origins, Ethiopia became a symbol for all of Africa and of the greatness of Black civilization. While equivocating as to the African or Semitic character of its own identity, Ethiopian nationalist discourse attempts to delegitimize Eritrean independence as inauthentically African by stressing its ties to the Arab world. In contrast, Eritrean nationalists emphasize

the similarity of their experience to that of other former African colonies and argue that, on this basis, Eritrea also should become independent.

S.K.B. Asante suggests that the imposed inferior status of Black people throughout Africa "evoked a psychological complex which fastened strongly upon the compensating idea of an independent African kingdom . . ."59 Because Ethiopia remained unconquered, it became symbolic of Black greatness, pride and liberty. Thus the earlier Classical Greek *synecdoche*, in which Ethiopia signified all of Africa, was again employed, this time by Africans themselves and invested with new meanings. Biblical and Classical Greek references to Ethiopia seemed to confirm the idea of an ancient African kingdom enduring to the present, and the term "Ethiopia" thus effected an ideological condensation, a collapsing-together of the present and the past, which was employed to combat racist claims opposing Western civilization to African barbarism. To consolidate its own hegemony, the Ethiopian monarchy asserted the antiquity and divine authority of its lineage, and these claims were accepted at face value elsewhere in Africa and abroad. For example, in the 1930s, the Gold Coast *African Morning Post* ran a series of articles stressing the glories of Ethiopian achievements; however, as Asante notes, there was a confusion of ancient and contemporary states:

. . . the Ethiopia to which the *Africa Morning Post* devoted its series was the classical Ethiopia which was Nubia on the upper Nile, and not the medieval or modern Ethiopia which is traceable to the ancient kingdom of Axum. Ethiopia of the 1930s was therefore quite distinct historically from the classical Ethiopia widely referred to in the New Testament. Thus, the Ethiopians of the twentieth century have no direct historical claims to the glories of ancient Ethiopia . . .60

Nevertheless, the Black press "overflowed" with articles concerning the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and it became a "fundamental issue in black life in 1935-1936."⁶¹ In this context, Haile Selassie acquired the status of a Christ-like or messiah figure, a position he still maintains in the Rastafarian cult, which took its name from that of the Emperor, known as Ras Tafari before his assumption of power.⁶² Numerous groups were organized to support Ethiopia, such as the International Council of the Friends of Ethiopia, the Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia, the American League Against War and Fascism, the League of Struggles for Negro Rights and many others. Organizations such as Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa Universal Negro Improvement Association and the Ethiopian World Federation, Incorporated, not only advanced defense of Ethiopia but advocated emigration.

This intersection of mythical and contemporary histories has had direct consequence for the competing nationalist struggles in Ethiopia. Despite the comparisons with colonial experience elsewhere drawn by Eritrean nationalists, other African countries have not endorsed the independence movement. Abdulrahman Mohammed Babu, former Minister of Economic Planning and Social Welfare in Tanzania, who presented the clause regarding the inviolability of colonial borders in Africa to the OAU, describes how Haile Selassie pushed for this following his annexation of Eritrea, and that other, inexperienced, African leaders accepted it, due to the Emperor's enormous prestige in Africa and the image of Ethiopia as a champion of African independence.⁶³

ETHIOPIA IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

Academic discourse on the Horn of Africa, growing out of philological concerns and a focus on the Semitic roots of the Great Tradition of highland Abyssinian culture and hagiographic chronicles of the royal court, also has accepted and reinforced the narrative of Greater Ethiopia, as exemplified in some key texts. Ullendorf's study emerges from the tradition of Semitic studies and is firmly fixed on the role of the highland Abyssinian peoples; he dismisses the Oromo:

The Gallas had little to contribute to the Semitized civilization of Ethiopia; they possessed no significant material or intellectual culture, and their social organization differed considerably from that of the population among whom they settled. They were not the only cause of the depressed state into which the country now sank, but they helped to prolong a situation from which even a physically and spiritually exhausted Ethiopia might otherwise have been able to recover far more quickly.⁶⁴

The Oromos are portrayed as drawing a reign of darkness over Ethiopia, a time of isolation, stunted intellectual development and xenophobia. They are essentialized as pure negativity, contrasted with the purposeful expansion of the Amhara:

Not until the advent of King Theodore in the mid-nineteenth century, does Ethiopia emerge from her isolation. Only then, in her rediscovered unity under the Emperors John, Menelik, and Haile Selassie, does the country find its soil and genius again, its spirit and its sense of mission.⁶⁵

Sven Rubenson's work,⁶⁶ a key text in the development of a modern Ethiopian historiography, accepts as given the unity of Ethiopian national identity and argues that it was this ideology,

rather than features of its geography, as earlier historians had claimed, which allowed Ethiopia to remain independent during the European "Scramble for Africa."

Echoing the claims made by Ethiopian officials who attempted to justify federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia on the basis of cultural uniformity, Levine argues that cultural differences within Ethiopia are superficial, and that more factors exist to unify the people of Ethiopia than to divide them.⁶⁷ Levine acknowledges his enthusiasm for Amhara culture, seeing it as the genius of Ethiopian civilization; he relegates the Oromo to a role of "antithesis." Issues of power, conquest and domination are set aside by Levine's theoretical approach. Regarding the nineteenth century Abyssinian conquests, he argues that "the question whether this imperial expansion was basically a subjugation of alien peoples or an ingathering of peoples with deep historical affinities" is best answered by the latter possibility. He believes this corrects the idea of an "arbitrary empire," and indicates a long history of interaction among those within the contemporary state, suggesting:

Traumatic though they were for most of the peoples subjugated, these conquests have been judged beneficial in several respects: they bolstered Ethiopia's position as an independent African power, greatly reduced the intertribal warfare and brigandage that had prevailed in the conquered areas, and paved the way for bringing an end to the slave trade in Ethiopia.⁶⁸

Levine notes thirty-two shared cultural traits to justify characterization of Ethiopia as a single culture area. However, these traits are extremely general (for example, "Annual calendar of religious ceremonies"), and are found throughout a much broader region ("Practice of circumcision," "Strongly pejorative image of women," etc.) so that delineation of a culture area corresponding to the boundaries of the Ethiopian state is questionable. In acknowledging that the cultural affinities he notes are also found outside the state's borders, Levine does indicate the "arbitrary" character of the empire.

The assumptions underlying Levine's analysis are challenged by discourses produced by "subjugated peoples." Eritreans, Oromos and Tigrayans insist they have been subjugated by the Ethiopian empire, and that their histories and cultural traditions have been suppressed. The narratives of nationalism constructed by these groups reject any notion that their incorporation into the empire should be described in so neutral a term as an "ingathering." The "beneficial" aspects of conquest detected by Levine are less apparent to the "subjugated peoples":

Under the colonial system Oromo people have been arrested and tried in Amhara courts. Many were convicted and sentenced to death. The brutality displayed in putting them to death is unbelievable. No people have ever been subjected to persecution that the Oromo have undergone as a result of Ethiopian colonialism.⁶⁹

Gebre-Medhin critiques Levine's Greater Ethiopia thesis, showing the paradigm's anti-materialist roots and arguing that it is an ideological intervention, justifying the empire's continuing existence:

If the core of Ethiopian civilization was originally located in Eritrea, then Eritrea can be regarded as an organic unit of Ethiopia. In turn, the struggle for Eritrea's independence can be termed "unnatural" and secessionist. Further, the expansion of the Shoan-Amhara rule to the south can be viewed as a positive step. In this view, Ethiopia's Great Tradition was only confronting and destroying the endless reproduction of the prehistoric Gadda system; absorbing and introducing the Oromo people to a higher civilization . . .⁷⁰

Only recently has academic attention turned to consideration of other cultures in the region and begun to question fundamental assumptions of traditional scholarship. Yet, typically, texts questioning Ethiopia's essential unity are dismissed as polemical.

IDENTITY CRISIS

Narrative versions of history in the Horn of Africa are in direct opposition, bringing into question the nature of Ethiopia and its continued existence. Ethiopian nationalist history, claiming links with ancient Axum, emphasizes continuity, unity and cultural identity. Opposing narrative constructions challenge these key themes and emphasize conquest, subjection and difference. History and identity are thus conceived in conflicting narratives. Ethiopian nationalism insists that identity is unchanging, that it has persisted for thousands of years and must be maintained at all costs. Independence for Eritrea, or the creation of an Oromo state, are regarded as something which would diminish the Ethiopian national self. The competing narrative of Eritrean nationalism insists that identity is changing, that different identities can be created at different points in history. Oromo identity now seems to have adopted a more essentialist form, stressing cultural distinctiveness, from that of Ethiopian, but this has not always been the case. The overthrow of Haile Selassie offered a chance to

resolve various national and ethnic issues, but this opportunity was lost as the Derg insisted on the same claims of Ethiopian nationalist discourse.

Thirty years of warfare have brought devastation to the Horn of Africa. In addition to those killed in battle, war exacerbated effects of drought and created massive famine, affecting millions. Such appalling events have brought Ethiopian identity to a state of crisis. Following the EPLF and TPLF victories since 1988, Ethiopian nationalism surged in response to what seemed to be the imminent disintegration of Ethiopia. Throughout North America and Europe, conferences of expatriates were organized to mobilize "support for the motherland." These conferences featured a surprising assortment of speakers, as the appeal to nationalism contended with other ideological commitments. For example, one meeting held in Ottawa included representatives from MEISON, EPRP, the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) and the Ethiopian government. The EDU is dedicated to restoration of the monarchy, while the other groups share both Marxist-Leninist rhetoric and a history of violent rivalry.

Compromise is seen as a threat of annihilation of the collective self, a fear of "a dilution and eventual loss of national identity, a negation of boundaries and distinctions . . ."71 It is difficult to see what compromise can be achieved, however. Counter-discourses to Ethiopian nationalism have been strengthened to the very extent that the latter has rejected their claims; chauvinism, rigidity and refusal to share power intensified existing differences. While the TPLF sought the Derg's downfall, Oromo and Eritrean movements have been oriented toward independence. The call for establishment of an independent Oromo state is fairly recent and, the extent of its appeal is uncertain, but clearly it grew in response to the Derg's denial of social justice. Whether or not serious social transformation can be implemented to meet Oromo aspirations and prevent further growth of nationalist sentiment remains to be seen.

In regard to Eritrea, Ethiopian intellectuals have proposed renewed federation as an alternative or a compromise which ostensibly can meet demands of both parties. This solution is encouraged by the United States, which has always opposed Eritrean independence and supported Ethiopia's "territorial integrity." While offering a form of continued association which may mollify Ethiopian claims to some degree, the proposal does not satisfy Eritrean demands for self-determination, and, seen as a concession if not outright surrender, is unlikely to be accepted. The positions are so polarized that federation seems unrealistic. Federation did not work under Haile Selassie, and after the Derg's intensified attacks on Eritrea's civilian population, anti-Ethiopian sentiment has grown to the extent that many Eritreans see no

reason to trust any new Ethiopian government and have no desire for close association. Offers of democratic reform by Ethiopian leaders and intellectuals are unlikely to be accepted if they are not premised on the referendum sought by the EPLF, which would allow Eritreans the opportunity to enter confidently into such a democracy.

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