

THE HISTORICAL ORBIT OF ERITREA'S AGONY

ALEMSEGED ABBAY

Their suffering under racist Italian colonialism pushed Eritreans to retreat into their millennia-old Ethiopian identity. However, suffocation under Ethiopian political oppression and cultural chauvinism led them to don a distinct counter identity of Eritrean-ness. Subsequently, the thirty-year-war between the forces of chauvinism (Ethiopia) and the forces of secession (Eritrea) has exposed the unimaginativeness of nationalism. Rather than seeking a mere redress to the legitimate grievances upon which it was constructed, Eritrean nationalism veered into a false consciousness of exceptionalism (Eritreanism), which per force became a zero-sum game for secession. When a divorce was finalized in 1991, both Ethiopia and Eritrea ended up being losers—the former lost access to the sea and the latter lost Ethiopia. By failing to deliver peace, democracy, and prosperity, secession has proven to be against the self-interests of the Eritrean people, so much so that now the very idea of Eritrea verges on death. Thus, based on emotion rather than cognition, nationalism can be a dysfunctional project. However powerful it may be, it does not have to lead to secession.

INTRODUCTION

It was at the end of the nineteenth century that Italian colonialism divided off the region north of the River Mareb, mostly from historic Ethiopia, and had

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named it “Eritrea,” which was after the Latin name for the Red Sea, *Mare Erythraeum*. Since that fateful moment, the people of the region have been thrust into continual agonies, under both European colonialism and oppressive Ethiopian rule. Unfortunately, the independent administration of Isaias Afewerki, which started in 1991, has also been extremely brutal and without vision. Secrecy and routine violations of human rights have earned the country the nickname of “Africa’s North Korea.”¹ Significantly, limited natural and human resources have made Eritrea’s independent life extremely turbulent. Far from enjoying its independence, for which they sacrificed so much for so long, Eritreans find their country so unlivable that they take unimaginable risks to leave it behind. Although colonialism and oppression have led to a successful Eritrean nationalism, peace and prosperity have eluded the country.

Based on archival research, this paper, which is a historical analysis of the agony that the Eritreans have endured for more than a century, shows that regardless of the legitimacy of grievances and irrespective of the price that has been paid to redress them, nationalism does not necessarily have to lead to secession. Secession is not a panacea.

UNHAPPY WITH ITALY

Eritreans harbored grievances against both Ethiopia and Italy. Immediately after taking power as emperor of Ethiopia in 1889, Menelik signed the Wutchale Treaty with the Italians who had supplied him with armaments, at a time when he was just king of the central region of Shoa, to challenge their mortal foe, Emperor Yohannes IV, who had been in power between 1872 and 1889. He willfully ceded the region north of the River Mareb to Italy, for monetary and military payoff.

The grudges that Eritreans had against Menelik for “selling” them to the Italians in 1889 were sustained until 1941 by the racist Italian colonial policy. Commonly referred to as the “torrid colony,”² Eritrea underwent significant modernization when Mussolini in the 1930s decided to use it as a gateway to the temperate and fertile Ethiopian highlands where he aspired to establish a colony to resettle Italy’s surplus population—“unwanted men who had left Italy for the good of their political healths [sic], and Fascists who had left Italy for the purpose of lining their pockets.”³ In the process, the small village of Asmara was transformed into *Piccola Roma* (“little Rome”) where around 75,000 Italians

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made their home, thousands of miles far from home, enjoying *la dolce vita* (the good life) that eluded them back in Italy. Since Eritrea was not a self-supporting colony, *la dolce vita* was maintained by enormous grants-in-aid from Italy. Slowly, the economy thrived with the appearance of small-scale industries, manufacturing of items that supplied local essentials such as buttons, matches, ropes, paper, porcelain, paint, perfumes, cigarettes, brushes, and motorcar batteries.⁴ Again, capital and know-how had to come from Italy because Eritrea was just “[one] of the world’s less promising deserts which Mussolini had decreed should blossom with at least an imported rose.”⁵

The appearance of *Piccola Roma* in an improbable part of Africa continued to surprise the British, who took trusteeship of Eritrea following the defeat of Italy in 1941, wondering “how this European city of broad boulevards, super-cinemas, super-fascist buildings, cafés, shops, two-way streets, and a first class hotel ever came to get there . . .”⁶ The British maintained the imported European culture, but started giving natives access to Western education.

All the while, some 100,000 natives were crowded in *quartiere indigeno* (native quarter), eking out their age-old life and enjoying none of *la dolce vita* that colonialism brought into their region. They were crowded into their native Abyssinian quarters, such as the fabled *Geza Enda Abba Shawul*, which lacked modern toilet systems and sufficient clean drinking water to meet basic needs. Further, natives could not promenade the sidewalks of the main streets of *Piccola Roma*; they were unwelcome in Italian cafés; and they would be trespassing if they were in Italian residential neighborhoods. The color line did not allow them to use the same windows in post offices or seats in buses as the settlers.⁷ Unlike the Italian children who received a good education, native children had access to little or no education.

Whatever substandard schools existed were meant to introduce children to the fascist doctrine of glorifying *Il Duce* and encouraging boys to become “*Piccolo ascari del Duce*” (Il Duce’s little soldiers). Even the *meticci* (biracial) children, recognized by their Italian fathers, had no access to Italian schools.⁸ Only in 1944 did the British rule make the “decision to admit half-breeds [sic] on the same basis as Italian children.”⁹ Consequently, because of lack of education, the British could not find trained natives to run Eritrea. Therefore, they had to retain the existing fascist personnel and bring trained colonial subjects from Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, Sudan, Rhodesia, Egypt, and Palestine, to operate their state machinery in Asmara.¹⁰

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Socialization between natives and settlers was negligible. Miscegenation was forbidden, as observed by Lillian Schoedler, a friend of the US First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.¹¹ Yet, the young Italian men found the Abyssinian women irresistible despite Mussolini's preaching of the gospel of race purity. Even his own son, Vittorio Mussolini, who was a member of the bombing staff during the Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935–36, stated that the Abyssinian women possessed “sex appeal”¹² and “most [Italians] . . . kept native mistresses.”¹³ Thus, when Mussolini decided to resettle a quarter of a million families in Ethiopia, it was feared that miscegenation was going to lead to a “considerable influx of African blood into Italy” whose net effect was dreaded to be not “negligible for the future of Europe.”¹⁴ Thus, as unwelcome byproducts of the institution of *madamismo*, the *meticci* were not spared the scourge of racism.

Since the highland region of Eritrea, commonly known as *Kebessa*, was a patrilineal society, mothers raised their *meticci* children as Italians. Despite being thoroughly assimilated into the Italian culture, though, the *meticci* could not pass for Italians, similar to the *coloured* of apartheid South Africa. Assimilated into the Afrikaner social-culture (sharing Afrikaans, Dutch Reformed Church, etc.), the *coloured* could not pass for Afrikaners because they were not white enough. Similarly, skin pigmentation kept the *meticci* out of the Italian settler world and the very color line that kept the Italians apart from the *meticci* even more markedly separated them from the natives. This sort of raw racism fed into the pool of grievances of the native population, yearning a return to Ethiopia.

The Italians, however, relied upon the natives for labor. Italy's colonial wars in Libya and Ethiopia were fought primarily by Eritreans. It was barefoot natives who labored to construct the streets, such as *Viale Mussolini*, and the modernist and art deco buildings of Asmara. Also, as domestic servants, messengers, etc., natives rendered all sorts of menial work so that the settlers could enjoy *la dolce vita*. The social division of labor was reflected in the bifurcation of the legal system. As citizens, the settlers were governed by civic codes, and natives were subjected to customary laws, which condoned slavery. Despite Mussolini's publicly stated Italian civilizing mission of eliminating “cruel despotism . . . [and] age-long slavery,”¹⁵ the institution of slavery remained intact in Eritrea, elaborately legislated in the customary laws and codified under Italian supervision.¹⁶ The separate legal systems were defended by the Ministry of Colonies: “We do not intend to extend metropolitan legislation and civil equality to

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natives, which . . . they would not understand or desire.”¹⁷ In the urban setting, too, residential segregation resembled that of apartheid South Africa. In colonial attitudes and policies, the zone of Geza Enda Abba Shawul was to *Piccola Roma* what Soweto was to Johannesburg under apartheid. Clearly, settlers and natives lived worlds apart and the Italian language was so arcane that, by 1931, only 1.1 percent of the native population had basic knowledge of it.¹⁸

Intense alienation and marginalization led Eritreans to firmly keep their Ethiopian identity, despite harboring deep grudges against Menelik, whom they called a “traitor”¹⁹ for giving them away to the Italians.²⁰ Yet, the peasant masses remained acquiescent. There were only local and individual attempts to get out of their state of unhappiness. For instance, the Akkele Guzai chief and collaborator, Bahta Hagos, rebelled in 1894 against his erstwhile masters, whom he referred to as “white snakes,” by telling them that Ethiopia was greater than Italy.²¹ Another collaborator-turned-rebel was *Blatta* Gabre Igziabher Gilay who used to repeatedly, bluntly, and harshly denigrate Menelik for “selling half of Tigray” to the Italians.²² In 1937, two Eritreans, Abraha Deboch and Moges Asgedom, tried to kill Marshal Graziani, Mussolini’s viceroy in Addis Ababa, the capital of *Africa Orientale Italiana*. Graziani retaliated by murdering 6,000 innocent natives, which was “quite a fair score even by Hitler’s standards.”²³ In 1938, Zerai Deres, a young Eritrean who was in Rome, killed Italians during the erection of the looted statue of the “Lion of Judah” in Rome’s *Cinquo Cento Square*.²⁴ Eritreans saw him as their hero for manifesting Ethiopian patriotism.²⁵ Even as recently as the 1980s, Woldeab Woldemariam, the most celebrated Eritrean political activist of the 1940s, bitterly criticized Menelik and his envoy *Ras Mekonnen* for “selling” Eritrea to the Italians for money and armaments.²⁶

Despite the wretched life of the natives, Italy boldly claimed that “Our Eritrean colony was the brightest and purest gem of European colonialism. . . . Traces of it remain . . . in the social and moral level of the Eritreans.”²⁷ “The brightest and purest gem of European colonialism,” Eritrea was indeed. Few, if any, colonialists would invest so much in a colony whose payoff was nothing except as a source of labor and a gateway to Ethiopia. Indeed, manicured Asmara, with its magnificent *Viale Mussolini*, was a showpiece of Italian grandiosity and engineering at its best. But, as an alien entity transplanted amongst them, the natives could not relate to it.

In the late 1940s, the Italian Foreign Minister, Count Sforza, must have had *Piccola Roma* in mind when he tried to convince the USA, Britain, and France

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to intervene on Italy's behalf to stop the return of Eritrea to Ethiopia. He claimed that the return of Europeanized Eritreans to pre-modern Ethiopia would be "an affront to Western civilization."²⁸ Of course, his claim that traces of Western values remain in the "social and moral level of the Eritreans," was sheer exaggeration because no Western "moral level," for instance, would permit slavery in its legal system. But, Italy codified in Eritrea customary laws, which legislated slavery. Moreover, Eritreans were not given the opportunity to internalize Western "social and moral" values because Italy actively prevented them from having access to Western education.

Natives were mere bystanders to the Europeanization of their country, as bitterly stated by Woldeab in 1947,²⁹ a bitterness he carried with him even three and a half decades later: "We were happy to see the English [replacing the Italians]. In fact, we were ready to welcome anyone except the Italians. We preferred the devil to the Italians."³⁰ Preferring the devil to the Italians was merely a rhetorical statement given the fact that they, particularly the *Kebessa*, strongly wanted to return to Ethiopia since colonialism did not disrupt their millennia-old Ethiopian identity. For Woldeab, Eritrea's Ethiopian identity was too profound and its economic resources too meager to allow it to be on its own. He, along with a handful of enlightened Eritreans, such as Lorenzo Tazaz and Ephrem Tewelde Medhin, strongly favored Eritrea's reunification with Ethiopia. Their efforts paid off as the United Nations in 1950 decided to federate it with Ethiopia. With its own flag, free press, official languages of Tigrigna and Arabic, as well as a parliament, Eritrea in 1952 became an autonomous unit within the Ethiopian imperial system—an arrangement Ethiopia was set to annul, leading to another phase of Eritrean agony.

UNHAPPY WITH ETHIOPIA

Since the forces of modernity that colonialism introduced north of the River Mareb did not disrupt tradition, there was no social mobilization among the various ethnic and religious groups that could have birthed a distinct Eritrean collective identity. This made the political fate of Eritrea manipulable when political actors used and abused primordial identities. Thus, during both the British trusteeship, which lasted until 1952, and the federal era, which followed until 1962, a deadly security dilemma beclouded Eritrea. Distrust among the political actors contributed to the rise of a fear of the future. First, there were

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the squabbles between the Muslim and Christian elites from the geographically, economically, and religiously divided communities. Led by Abdulkadir Kebire, Ali Mussa Radai, Ibrahim Sultan, Berhanu Ahmedin, and others, most of the Muslims, who came primarily from the pastoralist lowlands, were apprehensive about joining Ethiopia for fear of being dominated by the “Christian others.” But, the sedentary and agrarian *Kebessa* Christians wanted to be reunited with their “mother” Ethiopia. However, neither the Muslim nor the Christian leaders acted in unison. Whereas, with the support of Pakistan and Italy, Ibrahim Sultan, Abdulkadir Kebire and Berhanu Ahmedin wanted Eritrea to be independent, Ali Radai wanted the Western Province to split and join the Sudan. Similarly, the Christians were divided on the nature of unity with Ethiopia. Tadla Bairu, along with the Orthodox Church echelon, such as *Abune* Marcos, wanted an unconditional unity with Ethiopia. Woldeab and the *Ras* Tessema family were federalists or Conditional Unionists who wanted the merger of Eritrea and Tigray (northern Ethiopia) to form a political unit within the Ethiopian Empire, enjoying autonomy with their language, Tigrigna, as an academic and working language. Such multilateral divisions and intercommunal tensions, which do not necessarily threaten democratic societies, had a debilitating impact on Eritrea.

Eritrea had no democratic experience and the culture of tolerance was conspicuous only by its absence. Political discourses, thus, took personal lines. For instance, the war of words between the Unionist Tedla Bairu and the federalist Woldeab veered toward the primordial. By referring to Woldeab's Tigrayan parentage, Tedla crudely said that Woldeab had no business in the Eritrean political landscape. Woldeab retorted, wittily implying that Tedla's Eritrean pedigree stops at 50 years, in apparent reference to the claim of his Nigerian descent. The latter's “mixed racial stock . . . [with] darker, negroid forebears” led to the rumor that “Tedla is not really an Eritrean.”³¹ The seven attempts on Woldeab's life by “paid assassins” are testimonies to the zero-sum nature of the political game.³² Many political actors, such as Abdulkadir Kebire, were not as lucky as Woldeab. They were killed.

Finally, when the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 390 A (V) on December 2, 1950, federating Eritrea with Ethiopia, most Eritreans, including the Muslim leaders, settled and accepted the resolution wholeheartedly. However, as early as 1951, some Eritreans such as Ibrahim Sultan believed that the “threat of annexation” was hanging over them. To the US position that “it is far

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too early to be preoccupied with the concern that the Ethiopians are trying to ‘sabotage the federation,’” Ibrahim Sultan replied that “Every true Eritrean is fearful and apprehensive when he sees the endless chain of Amharic [sic] . . . functionaries coming to Asmara on confidential missions, the nature of which one can well surmise.”³³ “Underlying the policy of the Amhara,” the US Consul in Asmara, Edward W. Mulcahy, further reported that there was “a dislike at times amounting to outright hatred,” among all Eritreans.³⁴

THE FEDERAL ERA

The feeling of “anti-Shoanism” was augmented when the federation was formed and the regime’s policies continued to alienate Eritreans. No sooner was the federation enacted than Ethiopia clearly revealed its intension not to honor it when the Ethiopian Liaison Officer, Amdemichael Desalegn, read the Emperor’s message in the Eritrean Assembly in Amharic. The overall disappointment of the delegates was expressed by the sudden reaction of the Saho Qadi of Senafe and a delegate of the Democratic Front (formerly the Independence Bloc) who interrupted the message by shouting that Amharic was not an official language.³⁵

However, not all political actors represented the genuine interests of their constituency. For some, personal interests were paramount. That was the case with the former school teacher Tedla Bairu who became the Chief Executive of autonomous Eritrea. He started as Haile Selassie’s crony and, as a loyal Unionist, even entertained the idea of replacing the Italian appellation of “Eritrea” with the Geez designation of “Medre-bahr” (“Sea Land”).³⁶ Yet, no sooner did he assume power than he revealed his vain side—with manicured nails, fancy clothes, drinking habits, smoking, extra-marital affairs, and the accumulation of property, becoming a total disappointment.³⁷ Not surprisingly, he quickly developed a taste for power, so much so that he realized that annulling Eritrea’s federal status was not going to be in his best interests. Thus, he became a champion of maintaining the federation, according to its letter and spirit, embracing the very ideals of his mortal political foes—Woldeab Woldemariam, the *Ras* Tessema family, and Ibrahim Sultan. Blinded by the love of power, he could not see the implications of his newfound political stand and that he was risking a fallout with the emperor. Indeed, he earned brand new and powerful foes in Asfaha Woldemichael and the Church echelon, supported by the emperor’s

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representative in Eritrea, Andargachew Messai, who were all set to kill the federation. To his chagrin, it was the anti-federation camp that prevailed.

Instead of building a bridge of goodwill, embracing Eritreans in good faith, and honoring the federation, the state subjected them to both political centralization (a unitary state system) and the pathology of cultural homogenization (*amharanization*). The UN-brokered autonomy was instantly being castrated. When in 1952 the Eritrean Assembly adopted a sky-blue flag with crossed olive branches and the words "Eritrean Government" written side-by-side beneath the branches in both Arabic and Tigrigna, Andargachew Messai, who had not attended the flag-raising ceremony, angrily opposed the unfurling of the Eritrean flag. "Legally," he said, "no Eritrean flag exists."³⁸ Such impatience of the regime was stirring agitation among the public. Eritreans, in general, opposed the "the greater influx of Shoan 'carpetbaggers.'"³⁹ Worse still, the dispatch of a brigade of Ethiopian troops to Eritrea, sloganizing "እምቢ ያለ ሰው ጥይት አገርስው" ("feed he who says 'no' to a bullet") unnerved Eritreans from all shades of the political spectrum.⁴⁰ Only "four days after the birth of the Federation," the American Consul, Edward W. Mulcahy, lamented, "it is to be regretted that the blots on the new leaf were not avoided with a little more tact and consideration."⁴¹ The dying opposition made its last gasp: "We wish to point out that defense of Eritrean interests does not mean opposition to Ethiopia . . . it means the defense of the rights based on the principles of Federation."⁴² Indeed, the "blots on the new leaf" continued to nurture Eritrean agony.

The principal activist, Woldeab, grieved that the rights and democracy granted them by the United Nations were being "whittled away by the Amhara."⁴³ And after the seventh attempt on his life in 1953, Woldeab took a self-exile in the Sudan. The American Consul, Edward W. Clark, lamented:

"It is indeed regrettable that Eritrea should lose one of its few educated and intelligent sons, just when it is so vitally in need of all of them, but his elimination from the local scene by one means or another, given his ability and popularity with the people, was virtually a foregone conclusion."⁴⁴

Opposition leaders were being bought off, principal among whom was Ali Radai who had supported the partition of Eritrea so that his Western Province could merge with the Sudan. After 1952, though, he held prominent positions in the administrations of both Tedla Bairu and Asfaha Woldemichael. Others,

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such as the *Ras* Tessema family, were completely silenced. And still others, such as Ibrahim Sultan, followed Woldeab into self-exile. Out of favor, Tedla revealed his chameleon-like political persona: changing from an arch Unionist to a strong federalist and ultimately to a profound secessionist. His disenchantment was expressed to the American Consul in Addis Ababa that “The Shoans . . . could not care less . . . what happened to Eritrea, providing it was fully integrated into the Empire.”⁴⁵ By 1962, parliament was no more; the free press disappeared; political parties were banned; Amharic displaced Tigrigna and Arabic as the official language; and the sky-blue flag of autonomous Eritrea was nowhere to be seen. Eritrea was annexed, becoming the fourteenth province of Ethiopia, leading to another phase of anguish.

THE POST-FEDERAL ERA

To the agony of Eritreans, assimilationist forces were unleashed to stamp out their particularities. Certainly, the processes of political centralization and *amharanization* that Eritreans were subjected to were not exceptions to the rule. They were common policies of modernizing multi-ethnic empires such as the Russian Empire, which pursued *russification* and the Ottoman Empire, which came up with *turkification*, along with political centralization. Nonetheless, the all-too-familiar policy of modernizing multi-ethnic empires did not fare well with the Eritreans. They suffered from a sense of alienation and betrayal. Dispirited, Tedla himself left the country in 1966. And to the Eritreans who had the Wutchale Treaty and the narrative of being “sold” to the Italians in their collective memory, annulling the federation was a second betrayal.

The then-school-age children still sustain a bitter memory of the Amhara assimilationist policy. I was exposed to one of them on June 6, 2016, as I lined up in a store in downtown Silver Spring, Maryland, *en route* to Hungary to present this paper at the fourth African Studies Conference on June 9 and 10, which was held at the University of Pécsi. A woman in her mid to late sixties was ahead of me. She turned around and started talking to me in Amharic. From her accent, I knew she was a Tigrigna-speaker. Indeed, she told me that she was from Asmara. I flattered her on her impeccable Amharic and asked how she managed to command it. Raising her index finger, she accusingly shouted “school!” in apparent reference to the principal agency of *amharanization*. Raising her voice even more and wagging her index finger up in the air,

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she spewed her profound anger at what the Eritrean youth had to go through some six decades ago, as if it had all happened only a day earlier: “We started studying in Tigrigna, then came ለግ ሰገሰጾ (*Lema ba Gebeya*)!”⁴⁶ She used ለግ ሰገሰጾ, which was a very basic children’s book that the Ministry of Education used to publish in Amharic and distributed in primary schools all over Ethiopia, as a euphemism for Amharic. She presented the book as if it had a life of its own, with its own feet and mind, which trespassed their school yard, intruded into their classrooms and violated their routine academic life. She feminized the book to further berate it.⁴⁷ In addition to her tone of deep anger and the wagging of her index finger, the woman condensed the entire assimilationist educational system (math, social studies, science, etc.), which was all in Amharic, into only one silly children’s book. Such grievances, still fresh among Eritreans in their 60s and early 70s, fed into the 1960s nascent Eritrean secessionist nationalism, absent hitherto.

Despite hostility to state policies, which was reflected in the frequent refusal of the youth to salute the Ethiopian flag,⁴⁸ there was not a pan-Eritrean identity.⁴⁹ It was, therefore, raw emotions that preceded cognition when the first political entrepreneurs, who were lowland Muslims, framed the nationalist discourse of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), as Arabist:

“The leadership of the Eritrean Revolution, in observance of the organic cultural, historical and political relations that link the Eritrean people with the Arab Nation, stressing the common struggle against Zionism . . . shall reinforce and consolidate the relations of brotherhood and struggle.”⁵⁰

Indeed, there was confusion as to where the Eritrean identity resided. Arabizing it was an uphill battle since only 0.5 percent of the population was Arab. That was why the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), which split from the ELF in the early 1970s, readily disowned Eritrea’s Arab identity. Instead, it exposed the Jihadist and pan-Arabist nature of the ELF and rejected that Arabic was the official language of Eritrea.⁵¹ However, against the overwhelming historical records, the nationalist narrative of the ELF took even a stranger turn when it claimed that “For more than two thousand years, Eritrea with its old name ‘Medri Bahri’ (the land of the Sea), was a free self-governing country with its kings ‘Bahri Negasi’, which means King of the Sea. . . . Throughout the past centuries, the Eritrean people have risen up with unity and determination

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against the attempts of attack on the Eritrean border made by the Axumite Kingdom (Ethiopia).⁵²

On the contrary, the Axumite civilization was shared by the trans-Mareb region. With Adulis as its port, the region of today's Eritrea and Tigray was the core of the Axumite Empire. As such, Axum belongs to Eritrea as much as Adulis belongs to Tigray/Ethiopia. The emotion-based approach presented feudal and pre-modern Ethiopia as the "colonizer" of a far more "developed," "westernized," and "advanced" Eritrea. The zero-sum game, which was first launched by the ELF in 1961, when the first shots of the armed struggle were fired, lasted until 1991. Blinded by raw nationalist emotions, the political entrepreneurs could not ask even the most obvious question of whether secession was in the best interests of the people.

Nor did the Addis Ababa regimes ask whether Eritrea was worth so much bloodshed and all the resources that could have been better spent in developmental projects. As the secessionists ventilated the mythology of "colonized" Eritrea being far more advanced than its "colonizer," Ethiopia, the imperial response, which ignored the Eritrean plight, was equally arrogant and chauvinistic. According to Haile Selassie's viceroy in Eritrea, *Ras Asrate Kassa*:

Those who say that their language, their people, and their masters are different and do not accept the Eritrean-ness of Ethiopia and the Ethiopian-ness of Eritrea have already left the land [of Eritrea] and may even leave tomorrow. Otherwise, it must be known that the land [of Eritrea] can never escape its Ethiopian identity and it is profoundly an unbreakable organ of Ethiopia.⁵³

Eritreans perceived the message as the imperial policy of "we need only the land, not the people," which has echoed in the nationalist narrative. With its political and cultural impatience, the military junta, *Derg*, which succeeded the feudal regime in 1974, was no less chauvinistic. It retained the policies of the *ancien* regime and perceived the Eritrean people inimically:

Since the Eritrean uprising started [in 1961], the Eritrean people have been providing the bandits with manpower as well as material and moral support. . . . In general, the Eritrean people tend to support the bandits among whom are their own children and close relatives.⁵⁴

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Consequently, positions hardened as the politics of passion pervaded both sides of the Mareb. Like the imperial regime before it, the *Derg* overrated Eritrea and was determined to keep it at any cost. In March 1988, following the EPLF's monumental military victory at Afabet, which the British Africanist, Basil Davidson, in one of his BBC interviews, compared with Dien Bien Phu, the *Derg* leader, Mengistu Hailemariam, defiantly said "We prefer losing the Oga-den [Ethiopia's Somali region] to Eritrea." His deputy, Fikreselassie Wegderes, went further: "Without Eritrea, there is no Ethiopia."⁵⁵ A month later, emergency rule was proclaimed over Eritrea when one of the top *Derg* leaders, General Tesfaye Keberkidan, was put in charge. A member of the ruling party, Kassa Gebre, justified it thusly: "The reason for the proclamation of the emergency law was to terrorize the people, to tell them that an absolute dictator has been appointed as their administrator."⁵⁶ Neither side showed moderation.

As state nationalism, which was a euphemism for Amhara ethnic nationalism, continued to undermine their particularities, Eritreans felt suffocated by Ethiopia, which Ernest Gellner called "a prison of nationalities."⁵⁷ Consequently, the Amhara political entrepreneurs had a disjunctive relationship with the nascent Eritrean elite—the former were too anxious and too impatient to integrate and assimilate Eritrea and the latter felt Eritrea was too developed and too distinct to succumb. What was an imagined homogenous community to the former appeared as political suffocation to the latter. Armed with the heavy artillery of resistance against the pathology of *amharanization* and political centralization, the restless nascent Eritrean intelligentsia suffered from what can be called the neurosis of *Eritreanism*—a sense of superiority and exceptionalism.

A caveat is appropriate here. *Eritreanism* was not entirely an offshoot of the disjunctive relationship between the Amhara and the Eritrean political entrepreneurs. Back in the 1940s, Pakistan, a member of the UN fact-finding mission in Eritrea, wanted to prevent the return of "Muslim" Eritrea to "Christian" Ethiopia.⁵⁸ Italy was ecstatic with its newfound ally, Pakistan. Presenting Eritrean superiority and exceptionalism as the rationale, both agreed that "the Eritreans were solely Eritreans." In this regard, the Pakistani foreign minister, Zafrullah Khan, had delivered a speech in the United Nations, which was much appreciated by Count Sforza, who saw the situation as follows: "If there was to be any mandate, it must not be an Ethiopian mandate over Eritrea, but a mandate of the Eritrean people over the Ethiopian people, a people much inferior

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to the Eritreans but capable, with the passage of time and with the example of the Eritreans, of attaining the same degree of civilization.”⁵⁹

The arguments of the Pakistani and Italian delegates as well as the rigid and myopic policies of the state helped Eritrean elites to see themselves differently. Against this backdrop, the Eritrean political entrepreneurs built an edifice of superiority around the Italian colonial bequest and modernist city of Asmara. By claiming *Piccola Roma*, they perceived themselves as far more developed than their political masters, the Amhara. Hence, the quip, commonly attributed to Woldeab Woldemariam, that “አምላራ አሽምባይዶ ከገዝኡካሰ ንክትገዝኡም እኳ ዳገም” (“It is difficult to rule the Amhara, let alone to be ruled by them”). Germinated in Amhara ethnic nationalism, *Eritreanism* was a reactive nationalism. Without the former, the latter would have been unimaginable because most Eritreans are peasants, and peasants do not understand nationalism. Risk-averse, they tend to be apolitical.

Consider the fact that the trans-Mareb subsists meagerly. The anxiety of providing daily bread for families shapes the behavior of the people. Politics is, thus, a luxury to the peasantry whose dictum is “ዘበረቀኑ ዳሓይና ዝነገሰ ንጉሱና” (“the [star] that shines is our sun and he who is crowned is our king”). That was exactly how a reporter described the 1940s Eritreans: “Of the 800,000 unlettered peasants and nomadic shepherds . . . only a tiny minority are in any degree politically conscious. The Eritrean’s horizon is bounded by the tribe or the village community. He does not know what he wants, and he would accept any regime which did not disturb the quiet tenor of his way.”⁶⁰

A similar observation was made in the 1950s, when Eritreans understood neither the word nor the concept of “federation.” According to Asfaha Wolde-michael, Eritreans could not understand the federal constitution because, politically, they were “as immature as children.”⁶¹ As stated earlier, Italy’s rationale against extending civic codes and liberties to the natives as something they “would not understand or desire” was not altogether an exaggeration, albeit self-serving. It is, therefore, the Ethiopia state policies and behavior that alienated the otherwise acquiescent Eritreans. Clearly, Eritrean nationalism and, its germinator, Amhara ethnic nationalism, were dialectically related. To understand the one is to understand the other.

Arguably, Eritrea was ejected from Ethiopia. After the Adua victory in 1896, Menelik “reconciled with the Italians,” but not to reclaim what he had willfully ceded in 1889 at the Treaty of Wutchale. This led to the Eritrean grief of

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remaining “lost in the hands of the Italians.”⁶² During World War II, they were relieved of their colonial yoke when Italy was defeated and forced out of the region in 1941. Sloganizing “Ethiopia or Death,” Eritreans, particularly the *Kebe-ssa* Christians, most anxiously returned to Ethiopia in 1952 only to be alienated by the state policies. Worse still, during Eritrea’s “anti-colonial” armed struggle against Ethiopia, both the imperial and military regimes responded with numerous pogroms against civilians. In 1967, the first pogrom was committed in Adi Ibrahim, western Eritrea, where soldiers burned more than 100 houses and stabbed some 300 civilians to death.

In 1988, the *Derg*’s most notorious pogrom occurred in Sheeb, northern Eritrea, where more than 400 civilians were brutally massacred.⁶³ Such senseless state policies forced the youth to join the ELF and EPLF. People did not have the luxury of asking whether secession was in their best interests since both the imperial and military regimes were too inimical to them. Joining the guerilla fronts became a necessity, not a choice. It was this miserable failure of the imperial and military regimes to sincerely listen and properly address Eritrean grievances that led in 1991 to the ejection of Eritrea from, what Eritreans had been referring to, the Ethiopian “motherland.”

UNHAPPY WITH ITSELF

The birth of Eritrea is *sui generis*. It lacked the gradual historical processes that fermented England and France. It does not resemble the genesis of Germany or Italy where romantic nationalism glued the cultural with the political community. Nor does it resemble the dawn of African state-nations where colonialism lasted longer and gave them some sense of identity as South West Africans, Upper Voltas, Gold Coasts and Ivory Coasts. The half-a-century of separation from Ethiopia was too short and too alienating an era to give Eritrea a distinct identity. Nor did economic and cultural reasons justify its secession. Normally, it is wealthier regions such as the Baltic States, Biafra, Catalonia, Croatia, Katanga, Punjab, Quebec, Scotland, and Slovenia that yearn for secession. Eritrea did not belong to this club of bountiful entities. Nor did it have its own distinct pre-modern ethnic symbolism, which would have served as a building block for a potent nationalism.⁶⁴

Thus, the sense of exceptionalism (*Eritreanism*) so boldly entertained by the political actors is nothing but an over-heated reaction to oppression. The over-heated reaction included the inflated image of an Eritrea that was economically

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more “advanced” and socially far more “developed” than its “colonizer” Ethiopia. The Eritrean youth accepted this “anti-colonial” narrative as an article faith. Reasons and cost/benefit analyses were set aside. Indeed, *Eritreanism* is inherently an extreme form of nationalism and nationalism, like religion, is about faith.⁶⁵

Imagined Eritrea rendezvoused with real Eritrea when the EPLF triumphantly entered Asmara in 1991. The once lively and busy *Viale Mussolini* was deserted. Italian skilled manpower and industrial capital as well as Arab, Armenian, Jewish, and South Asian commercial capital had left the region by 1975. Imagined Eritrea could not possibly be more different from real Eritrea, and Asmara, with its modernist and art deco buildings and paved modern streets, albeit aging and tired, was a mere shadow of *Piccola Roma*—a frozen 1930s Italian provincial town.⁶⁶ Yet, despite the fact that reality and disillusionment have been creeping up, the current political entrepreneurs do not want to cease and desist from imagining a fanciful Eritrea. They even attempted to neutralize the glaring, but frustrating, gap between the imagined and real Eritrea by entertaining the dream of making it the Singapore of the Horn of Africa.⁶⁷

In 1997, without great forethought, *Eritreanism* led to the issuance of a national currency, *naqfa*, and Eritrea demanded that it had to have parity with the Ethiopian *birr*, as well as free circulation in Ethiopia.⁶⁸ By then, it had become too obvious to the Eritreans that *singaporizing* Eritrea required having a total free access to the Ethiopian economy. When Ethiopia refused to commit, what appeared to be, economic suicide, Eritrea invaded and occupied borderlands such as Badme in 1998, masking the crisis as a “border war.”⁶⁹

During the armed struggle era, nationalism had been considered so essential and natural that more than 65,000 Eritreans paid the ultimate price for a highly romanticized Eritrea. In the 1998–2000 “border war,” another 20,000 Eritreans were added to the long-list of “martyrs.” On June 12, 2016, Eritrea provoked skirmishes against Ethiopia. At the time, the thirty-second session of the UN Human Rights Council was going to convene on July 1, 2016, to adopt the recommendation of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea that the Eritrean government behavior “Constitute Crimes against Humanity.”⁷⁰ The skirmishes were, apparently, intended to divert public attention from the expected outcome of adopting the recommendation. According to Isaias, eighteen Eritreans died during the skirmishes. The longer the list of “martyrs,” the more deified Eritrea is and there is no shortage of “martyrs” since

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independent Eritrea, within its short life, has waged wars with all its neighbors: Sudan, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Yemen. The wars are justified by *Eritreanism* and the long list of “martyrs” is used to reify the idea of Eritrea.

Secession proved less in Eritrea's than in Ethiopia's best interests. Despite being land-locked, for more than a decade now, Ethiopia's economy has been one of the fastest growing in the world. By all accounts, Ethiopia, dubbed by economists “the African Lion,” is rising fast.⁷¹ Eritrea, on the contrary, has been trapped in an economic blind alley. As if squeezing blood from stone, though, the leaders keep on expecting independence to deliver what it had supposedly promised. In reality, the struggle for independence has been far too costly and the return far too little.

With 5,000 youth leaving every month, secession has made Eritrea the most self-emptying peacetime polity in world history. By any peacetime standards, Eritrea's exodus is extreme. In a mere decade and a half, about a tenth of its population has already left. All those who try to leave risk being shot to death by the Eritrean security forces. “Shoot-to-kill” is the order of the government against anyone leaving the country. Among those who succeed, many try to reach Europe via the Sahara and end up in the hands of Bedouin organ harvesters. Others drown in the Mediterranean Sea while trying to cross in smuggling boats.⁷² Despite the unimaginable risks, though, emigration continues unabated. The commonest reason given for the exodus is the endless conscription and denial of basic civil liberties, so much so that, according to the artist Kiros Asfaha, who fled Eritrea to Ethiopia in 2015, Eritreans miss Mengistu Hailemar-iam, the “black Stalin,” who terrorized Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991.⁷³ However, the brutal and erratic behavior of Isaias Afewerki has served as the perfect scape-goat for Eritrea's economic malaise. Opposition groups also use Isaias as the catchall dictator, comparing him with Muammar Gaddafi, Robert Mugabe, Benito Mussolini, and Adolf Hitler. Undeniably, Isaias holds a comparable record with history's worst leaders. However, what is conveniently overlooked is the fact that Eritrea is not oil-rich Libya or bountiful Zimbabwe, and certainly not the 1930s industrialized Italy or Germany.

Resource-poor Eritrea's cultivable land is extremely small.⁷⁴ In the 1940s, Woldeab had warned Eritreans not to push for independence because Eritrea did not have the economic wherewithal to go it alone. Unless reunited with Ethiopia, he prophetically stated, Eritrea was going to die.⁷⁵ Economic realities, inter alia, led the US State Department to advise President F. D. Roosevelt that

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Eritrea had no “*raison d'être* of its own. . . . No justification is perceived for . . . [its] perpetuation as a separate entity.”⁷⁶ Stunningly, even the very champion of Eritrean independence in the 1940s, Italy, itself admitted that “The Eritreans of the future . . . would not be able to live unless they were on good terms with Ethiopia.”⁷⁷ *Eritreanism* disregarded all those warnings and sought to go it alone. Going it alone, Eritrea did in 1991 but only against its own self-interests. The result has been the current economic malaise which is only blurred by Isaias’s abusive and erratic rule.

CONCLUSION

Swept by emotions against political and cultural oppression, Eritreans adopted a secessionist agenda. Without weighing the costs/benefits of a nationalist struggle that was highly romanticized in the 1960s, they sought to be masters in their own house, which they became in 1991. However, secession, particularly for resource-poor regions like Eritrea, is not a panacea.

Thus, Eritrean political entrepreneurs should have tackled the right issues head-on—whether Eritrea’s problem was a colonial question and whether secession was the solution. Thanks to the 100,000 “martyrs,” the idea of Eritrea has been reified. Indeed, Eritrea has been deified so much that killing in its name has not been considered murder and dying for it has always been an honorable martyrdom. Yet, after a quarter of a century of independence, Eritrea’s agony persists as secession has failed to deliver peace, prosperity, and democracy. With 5,000 people taking unimaginable risks to leave it every month, the “North Korea of Africa” is now the most self-emptying peacetime polity in the world. If Eritreans let the chips fall where they may, the idea of Eritrea will be no more. And for those who believed in the idea and sacrificed so much for it, it would be a painful and ultimate tragedy. That makes the metaphor of neurosis for *Eritreanism* inescapable.

NOTES

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8. *Report on Eritrea. Four Power Commission, 1948*. Section V. Foreign Office 371-69361, 69.
9. *British Military Administration, Eritrea, Annual Report, 1944*, NND760050, 26.
10. Gandar Dower, "British Administration in Eritrea and Somalia 1941–1943," 6.
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12. R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2002), 307.
13. Noe Baker, Ministry of War Transport, to Richard Law, M.P., Foreign Office, July 29, 1943, 371/35627, 28.
14. J. B. S. Haldane, "An Italo-African Race?" *The Times* (London), May 22, 1936.
15. American Embassy, "Text of Mussolini's speech upon the entry of Italian troops to Addis Ababa delivered on May 5, 1936 to the people of Italy," to the Secretary of State, Washington, D.C. May 5, 1936, Telegram #130.
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17. American Embassy, Rome, to Department of State, September 30, 1936. Desp. No. 18.
18. Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882–1941* (Uppsala, 1986), 67.
19. Irma Taddia, "Ethiopian source material and colonial rule in Nineteenth Century: the Letter to Menilik (1899) by Blatta Gara Egzi'abeher," *Journal of African History*, 34 (Cambridge, 1993); Tekeste Negash, *No Medicine for the Bite of a White Snake: Notes on Nationalism and Resistance in Eritrea, 1890–1940* (Uppsala, 1986); G.F-H. Berkeley, *The Campaign of Adowa and the Rise of Menilik* (London, [1902] 1935).
20. Johannes Kolmodon, *Traditions de Tsazzega et Hazzega* (Uppsala, 1915), para 286.
21. Richard Caulk, "'Black snake, white snake': Bahta Hagos and his revolt against Italian overrule in Eritrea, 1894" in *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest*, ed. Donald Crummey (London: James Curry, 1986), 298.
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23. Noe Baker, Ministry of War Transport, to Richard Law, M.P., Foreign Office.

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24. *Ras Mengesha Seyoum* interview with SBS Radio, Amharic, April 11, 2016. The Square was named in memory of and tribute to the 500 Italian soldiers who were killed in 1887 at the Battle of Dogali by *Ras Alula's* army. Whilst Italy memorizes its victims by naming a square "Cinquo Cento" in Rome, the statue of *Ras Alula* that had been erected in Dogali, tribute to his heroic acts, was demolished by the EPLF in 1991. Forgetting the past, which evinced the umbilical links of the two sides of the Mareb, was dialectically related to remembering the invented present in the process of constructing the Eritrean nation.
25. Woldeab Woldemariam, interview, (Rome: RICE), November 2, 1982.
26. *Ibid.*
27. "Count Sforza on Eritrea in the Italian Parliament on December 12th," From Rome to Foreign Office, Telegram No. 1560, December 15, 1949, J9773.
28. *Ibid.*
29. American Legation, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to the Secretary of State, Washington, D.C., March 20, 1947. NND 760056.
30. Woldeab Woldemariam, interview, (Rome: RICE), November 2, 1982.
31. "Tedla Bairu elected first Chief of Executive of Eritrea," Amconsulate, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington, D.C., September 3, 1952. Desp. No. 25.
32. "Further Developments Regarding Annulment of Election to Assembly of Ato Woldeab Woldemariam," Amconuslate, Asmara, to The Department of State, Washington, D.C., May 15, 1953, Desp. No. 126.
33. "Conversation with Ibrahim Sultan," Amconsulate, Asmara, to The Department of State, Washington, D.C., November 8, 1951, Desp. No. 83.
34. *Ibid.* Amhara are the second most numerous ethnic group in Ethiopia. With the coming of Menelik of Shoa, central Ethiopia, to power at the turn of the twentieth century, they became socially and politically dominant group in Ethiopia. Stripped of its innocence, their language, Amharic, became a tool of oppression.
35. "Instances of Moslem Discontent in Current Eritrean Politics," April 29, 1952, Desp. No. 163.
36. "Unionists call for the end of name 'Eritrea'," Amconsulate, Asmara, to Department of State, Washington, D.C., September 25, 1952, Desp. No. 38.
37. Clarence T. Breaux, Amconsulate, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington, D.C., Desp. 87, January 16, 1953.
38. "Official Call on Emperor's Representative in Eritrea," Amconsulate, Asmara, to The State Department, Washington, D.C., September 24, 1952, Desp. No. 36.
39. "Politics in Eritrea during federation week."
40. Askalu Menqerios, Head, Union of Eritrean Women, interview, July 1, 1994, Asmara.

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41. "Politics in Eritrea during federation week," Amconsulate, Asmara, to The State Department, Washington, D.C., September 19, 1952, Desp. No. 34.
42. Taken from an article that appeared in the opposition paper *Voice of Eritrea*, November 29, 1952, a few months before the government closed it, Amconsulate, Asmara, to The State Department, Washington, D.C., December 23, 1952, Desp. No. 78.
43. "Further development regarding annulment of election to Assembly of Ato Woldeab Woldemariam," Amconsulate, Asmara, to The State Department, Washington, D.C., May 15, 1953, Desp. No. 126.
44. "Ethiopian Government Grants Passport and Exit Visa to Woldeab Woldemariam," Amconsul, Asmara, to The State Department, Washington, D.C., August 12, 1953, Desp. No. 23.
45. "Eritrean political situation, as well as developments in Addis Ababa," American Consul, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington, D.C., December 20, 1961, Enclosure 1 to Desp. No. 48.
46. Lema is a typical Amhara male name and Gabeya is market in Amharic.
47. As a berating strategy, the patriarchal trans-Mareb society feminizes men and objects.
48. American Consulate, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington, D.C. Desp. No. 79, June 13, 1957.
49. A pan-Eritrean identity does not arise in earnest until the middle of the 1970s, primarily in reaction to the brutal and senseless state behavior.
50. The Eritrean Liberation Front Political Program, 2nd National Congress of the ELF, May 28, 1975, 31.
51. Eritrean People's Liberation Forces, *Our Struggle and its Goals* (N.D., may be 1970 or 1971), 3, 20.
52. "A Short Historical Background of Eritrea," *People's Liberation Forces of the ELF* (N.D and N.P), Research and Documentation Center of Eritrea, Asmara, Eritrea.
53. Quoted in ማሞ ውድነህ የኤርትራ ታሪክ (አስመራ: ኮከብ ጽባህ ማተሚያ ቤት መስከረም 1962 አ ም)፣ 2
54. በሀገር ውስጥ ደህንነት ጥበቃ ምኒስቴር የ1977 አም አመታዊ ሰሚናር ሂደትና ይዘት ቅጽ 1 (አዲስ አበባ ፡ ነሀሴ 1977 አም), 41, 43.
55. See የኢሲፖ ማእከላዊ ኮሚቴ ፖለቲካ ቢሮ 78ኛ መደበኛ ስብሰባ ቃለ ጉባኤ (መጋቢት 20 1980 አም), 63, 88.
56. See የኢሲፖ ማእከላዊ ኮሚቴ ፖለቲካ ቢሮ 78ኛ መደበኛ ስብሰባ ቃለ ጉባኤ (ሚያዝያ 25 1980 አም), 134.
57. E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 85.
58. The UN Commission was formed in 1950, consisting of Burma, Guatemala, Norway, Pakistan, and South Africa.
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61. Earl J. Richey, American Consul, "Reporting Conversation with Chief Executive of Eritrea," Amconsul, Asmara, to the Department of State, Washington, D.C., April 24, 1958, Desp. No. 76.
62. Johannes Kolmodon, *Traditions de Tsazzega et Hazzega*. para. 286: "Mais le Roi, se reconciliant finalement avec l'italien, lui céda le Mareb-Mellasc. [C'est] ainsi [que] nous autres, hommes du Hamsên, nous restâmes perdus [aux mains de l'italien]"
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64. Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 14, 26–27.
65. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Norfolk: Thetford Press, 1983).
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67. Berhe Habte Giorgis, "Events in Ethiopia," House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee, June 19, 1991.
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