The Complex Roots of the Second Eritrea-Ethiopia War: Re-examining the Causes

Redie Bereketeab*

Abstract

The article highlights some of the embedded plausible causes of the war that are quite often glossed over. It argues that at the centre of the conflict stand different perceptions of history, identity, as well as claims and counterclaims of state rights, decolonisation process, and nation-state formation. Beyond the minor border skirmishes of May 1998, the contested interpretation of history and identity formation, and the concomitant search for a separate identity and sovereignty, on one hand, and denial of that separate identity and sovereignty, on the other, explain the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict. In that sense the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict will be found to revolve around the status of Eritrean independence. Moreover two sets of the conflict − Tigray-Eritrea and Ethiopia-Eritrea − have further complicated the search for settlement of the conflict. The first step towards finding a lasting solution that would normalise relations between the two countries would be Ethiopia's definitive and unconditional recognition and acceptance of separate Eritrean identity and sovereignty, including its colonial boundaries. Both the people of Tigray, and Ethiopia as a whole, need to accept this reality. Secondly, Ethiopia's legitimate interest should be addressed in a manner that will not undermine Eritrea's sovereignty. Only then will Ethiopia's need to have access to the sea find lasting and amicable solution acceptable to both sides.

Key Words: Eritrea, Ethiopia, EPLF, TPLF, war, history, identity, sovereignty

∗ Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, Sweden. Email: redie.bereketead@nai.uu.se

Résumé

Cet article met en relief certaines des causes profondes plausibles de la guerre qui sont assez souvent minimisées. Il soutient qu'au cœur du conflit se trouvent des perceptions différentes de l'histoire, de l'identité, ainsi que des revendications et contre-revendications des droits d'Etat, le processus de décolonisation, et la formation de l'Etat-nation. Au-delà des petits accrochages frontaliers de mai 1998, le conflit entre l'Erythrée et l'Ethiopie s'explique, d'une part, par l'interprétation contestée de l'histoire et de la formation de l'identité, ainsi que la quête concomitante d'identité et de souveraineté distinctes, et d'autre part, son déni de. Ainsi, on notera que le conflit entre l'Erythrée et l'Ethiopie tourne autour du statut de l'indépendance de l'Erythrée. De plus, deux groupes du conflit – Tigré-Ethiopie et Ethiopie-Erythrée – ont compliqué davantage la recherche d'un règlement. Le premier pas dans la recherche d'une solution durable qui normaliserait les relations entre les deux pays serait la reconnaissance et l'acceptation définitives et inconditionnelles par l'Ethiopie de l'identité et la souveraineté distinctes de l'Erythrée, y compris ses frontières coloniales. Les tigréens tout comme l'ensemble des éthiopiens doivent accepter cette réalité. Deuxièmement, l'intérêt légitime de l'Ethiopie doit être traité de manière à ne pas compromettre la souveraineté de l'Erythrée. C'est alors seulement que le besoin de l'Ethiopie d'avoir accès à la mer trouvera une solution à l'amiable durable et acceptable pour les deux parties.

Introduction

The second war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, 1998-2000, shocked the international community as well as nationals of the respective countries. In addition to its seemingly unexpected nature, (at least to some) it defies any logic and rational explanation. The war came as a shock to many because the post-Dergue era relations between the two states began on a good footing. Indeed, it was considered a good model to replicate in other states whose relations had been marked by long and continuous wars. The amicable relations not only contributed to the bafflement to see a deadly war break out suddenly, but also many observers and analysts were put unable to provide rational explanations. It seems many analysts were caught of guard such that they had to provide diverse, and at times contradictory, explanations on the causes of the war.

The second Eritrean-Ethiopian war was depicted as one between brothers (cf. Negash and Tronvoll 2000). It was also described as a conflict between two bald men's fight for a comb, a senseless war (cf. Mengisteab 1999; Mengisteab and Yohannes 2005:231). Others described it as prestige war,[1] border war, Eritrea's economic non-viability (Abbay 2001; Tadesse 1999). Yet, others were convinced that it has to do with Ethiopia's failure to accept Eritrean sovereignty (Fessehatzion 2002). Ethiopia's obsession with gaining an outlet to the sea, collusion of Eritrea-Tigray identities (Abbay 1998; Reid 2003), unresolved pre-liberation problematic relations of the liberation fronts (Lata 2003; Bereketeab 2009) were also given as plausible explanations.

To majority of Eritreans, the second war was not a senseless war as many observers and the media have tried to present it. In the perception of many Eritreans the conflict had to do with Eritrean sovereignty. It was obvious that the Eritreans were afraid that the war intended to achieve what the 1993 referendum failed to complete: the demarcation of the emerging sovereign Eritrean state and territory (cf. Zondi and Rejouis 2006). The perception was reinforced by a massive campaign of Ethiopians demanding to reverse Eritrea's independence (see, e.g., Sorenson and Matsouka 2001; Lata 2003; Mengisteab and Yohannes 2005; Tadesse and Young 2002). Conversely for many Ethiopians the war represented a chance to reclaim a territory that has been 'illegally separated' (cf. Mengisteab and Yohannes 2005:255-7; Sorenson and Matsouka 2001:55-7). Yet, the war was portrayed as an Eritrean making. Eritrea was presented as the invader.

Notwithstanding all this, it could be said that the good post-liberation relationship seemed to be placed on false assumptions and expectations. As things began slowly to become clear the two governments might have had contradictory, indeed, opposing expectations of their post-liberation relation. Apparently, the Eritrean government was bent to exploit the larger Ethiopian market in order to rebuild the war-torn nation. Conversely, the Ethiopian government's calculation seemed to be based on the logic that economic dependence would lead to political dependence. By allowing unfettered access to its market, the Ethiopian government intended to tie Eritrea in a situation of economic dependency. This economic dependency, in turn, was presumed to lead to political dependency (Lata 2003:377; Trivelli 1999). Statements by various Eritrean officials also complicated the issue. The issuance of the Eritrean currency in 1997 seemed to have shattered the thick cloud of illusions and misplaced expectations on the Ethiopian side. Ethiopia realised that the economic 'free rider' chance given to Eritrea failed to engender its long-term

political objectives of 'political union' between both countries. Hence, the Ethiopian government unilaterally abrogated the 1993 Friendship and Cooperation Agreement (FCA).[2] Ethiopia, in what could completely rearrange and reverse the FCA if implemented, proposed that all trade transactions between the two countries be carried out in foreign currency. Eritrea rejected the idea and proposed that the two national currencies trade on an equal basis. The two governments were unable to resolve this policy difference, which led Ethiopia to boycott Eritrean seaports and redirect its trade through Djibouti. After this a number of incidents followed that eventually triggered the outbreak of the war in May 1998.

Concerted efforts to end the war and resolve the dispute between the two states proved rather intractable. One of the reasons why the mediation efforts failed to yield possible results was the abject failure of the international community. The key actors failed to have an adequate understanding of the complex roots of the dispute. Rather, what obtained was a simplistic approach that saw the conflict as a simple border dispute. Thus the focus on a border resolution approach towards the war was doomed to end in failure. It took three rounds of military campaign for the warring parties to sit down and sign a peace agreement on 12 December 2000, in Algiers. Nonetheless, when the verdict of the Court of Arbitration, which the two governments signed to be final and binding, was announced in April 2002, Ethiopia rejected it because the Court awarded the flashpoint of the war (Badme) to Eritrea. Again, the international community was unable to uphold the Algiers Agreement. Eritrea accused the mediators, particularly the USA, of siding with Ethiopia and blocking the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission's verdict. Failure in the implementation of the Boundary Commission verdict was also attributed to the international community whose complacency made Ethiopia to get away with the rejection of international court verdict. This is due to Ethiopia's strategic importance to the West and its alliance with the USA against terrorism particularly after 9/11. It also has to do with Eritrea's diplomatic fiasco in its dealing with the international community (Zondi and Rejouis 2006:80; Healy and Plaut 2007:9; Mengisteab and Yohannes 2005:228).

Thus, the conflict has continued. From the foregoing it is logical to pose two crucial questions, notably: why have both parties to the conflict failed to resolve their differences peacefully? And why has the international mediation failed both in stopping the war and implementing the Boundary Commission's verdict?

The answers to both questions could also be sought in the complexity of factors underpinning the conflict. For the contestants it could be said that

profound and substantial issues swept under the carpet made the reaching of an amicable solution quite impossible. For the international community and the mediators in particular their failure to grasp the complex roots and substance of the conflict, and the contending geo-political strategic interests made it impossible for them to solve the conflict between the two countries. In terms of the latter it could be said more importantly and historically that Ethiopia was perceived as anchor state in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia's significance has also increased since September 11 and the inception of war on terror. Now Ethiopia is the single most important ally of the USA in the region. Therefore any force that challenges Ethiopia's hegemony was considered as spoiler of peace, stability and order in the region. Moreover, it is seen as defying the hierarchical world arrangement of hegemony. In this sense, Eritrea is not only challenging Ethiopia's hegemony in the region but also hegemony of the New World Order led by the USA. For the USA, Eritrea is wildly out of control, thus, it has to be tamed. Because of Eritrea's disobedient behaviour and in order to appease Ethiopia the final and binding border verdict has been sacrificed. Conversely, on 23 December 2009, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) imposed sanctions on Eritrea for its alleged 'Role in Somalia, refusal to withdraw troops following conflict with Djibouti' (UNSC, SC/9833, 23 December 2009).

Two fundamental questions triggered the endeavour to write this paper. The first is how a small village could be a cause of an unfathomable carnage and, the second, why the conflict has proven extremely difficult to settle. The point of departure of this paper is that the causes of the war are more complex than is often admitted. I argue that complex interrelated causal factors should be sought to explain the conflict. Some of the underlying root causes suggested include historical incidents and concomitant memories (e.g., colonialism and colonial memories). Claims and counterclaims, that is, contested pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial histories, trajectories and narratives that divide the shaping of the two countries could be accounted for. Mythologies and historical constructions (Ethiopian), on the one hand, and deconstructions and reconstructions (Eritrean), on the other hand; and divergent nation and state formations and political economies; power contestations, all add to the complexity. Time and scope would not allow dealing with all these variables in detail. The primary aim here is to highlight some of these latent variables which people ignore or seem to have little understanding of, in the hope of enhancing our understanding of the conflict.

In its theoretical and methodological approach the paper is eclectic. It combines history, culture, politics, identity, mythology, reality, power relations (local and international), international relations, migration studies, etc. This

renders the paper interdisciplinary. Broadly, it draws on theories of nation-state building, colonisation and decolonisation. However, it is worthwhile to mention that the two countries use these theories differently, indeed, for opposing purposes. For Ethiopians colonialism means artificiality, fabrication and falsity. It was the evil acts of colonialism that separated Eritrea from its motherland. Therefore, decolonisation should mean returning a territory that was illegally snatched of from the motherland. It is also purported that the artificiality, fabrication and falsity of colonial creation would not enable Eritrea to exist as a sovereign nation-state. Eritreans, on the other hand, employ theories of colonialism, decolonisation and state formation, to justify their claim of Eritrea's formation as a modern nation-state. Eritreans claim modern Eritrea was created by colonialism and it should have been given its independence long ago by the act of decolonisation. They insist that Eritrea is legally entitled for decolonisation and subsequent existence as a sovereign nation-state with its colonially determined international boundaries.

The overall objective of the paper is to highlight some of the embedded plausible causal factors of the second Eritrea-Ethiopia war (1998-2000). It argues that at the centre of the conflict stand different perceptions of history, identity, as well as claims and counterclaims of state rights, decolonisation process, and state formation. The paper identifies two levels — Eritrea-Ethiopia, on one hand, and Eritrea-Tigray, on the other — as units of analysis of the embedded configuration of the causal factors of the conflict. It also aims at increasing our knowledge and understanding of the conflict by examining some of the causalities that are quite often glossed over because they are considered as less important even though they may be relevant in explaining the origin of the conflict. It interrogates history and the unfolding macro and micro events, processes, socio-psychological imaginations and prejudices, etc. that may have shaped the two nations.

In this paper I have not given space for the second war itself and the Algiers Agreement. Firstly, because I have dealt with it in another work (Bereketeab 2009), secondly, though there is no systematic interrogation of the embedded causalities, there is a lot written about it (see. e.g., Tadesse 1999, Negash and Tronvoll 2000; Fessahatzion 2002; Lata 2003; Reid 2003; Jacquin-Berdal and Plaut 2004).

The data for the paper consists of text analysis and interpretation, literature review, official documents and interviews, personal observations and experiences drawn from folkloric anecdotes and personal involvement in the Eritrean struggle.

Colonialism and Nation Formation

Most current African nations are the product of European colonialism. The Berlin Conference of 1884/5 on the scramble for Africa surgically divided the future nations of Africa using pencils and rulers without paying any consideration for cultural, ethnic, linguistic, topographic differences. The result is that the colonial nations became multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, multi-religious societies that made the nation formation enterprise extremely precarious (Mazrui 1983; Davidson 1992; Young 1994). The first step the colonial state took, in the process of colonial nation formation, was territorial compartmentalisation. The territorial centralisation was to form the foundation of the emerging colonial nations. This territorial basis of nationhood in Africa has led some scholars to designate nations in Africa as *territorial nations* (Smith 1983: 128; Hodgkin 1956; Clapham 1985). The post-colonial nation builders were also compelled to preserve the inviolability of the colonial territorial foundation of their nations. A conscious act of nation building required not only continuity and consolidation of colonially created territoriality but also fostering loyalty and allegiance of all the variegated peoples residing within it to the territorial nation. Moreover, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) simply endorsed the inviolability the colonial territoriality in its founding conference in 1963.

It is to be recalled that the colonially induced territorial centralisation was also followed by a number of measures such as centralised rule and bureaucracy, uniform taxation, administration and political centralisation that thrusted the colonial nation formation process forward. It is to be noted that this territorial delineation undertook simultaneous acts of exclusivity and inclusivity. In terms of inclusivity, all those within the compartmentalised territory were perceived as members of the nation, while in terms of exclusivity those outside the parameters of the territory were perceived as aliens. This physical infrastructure of nation formation needed, however, to be complemented by cognitive aspects. The cognitive aspects of the infrastructure of nation formation in Africa were arguably generated by exploitation, oppression, resistance and liberation struggles. This in turn is presumed to foster common experience, common suffering, common destiny that eventually bonded together the divergent ethnic groups. All this could be said to have culminated in the creation of nationalism. Nationalism, it is argued, generates three things: (i) explains common origin of people; (ii) provides a sense of identity to people and legitimacy to the ruling authorities; (iii) it proposes certain ideals to aspire to (Vincent 1987:27). It would be now possible to safely draw the inference that

colonial territoriality endowed African nations their jurisdictionally recognised state of existence.

Nonetheless colonial nation formation in Africa differs from the historical absolutist nation formation in Europe in one fundamental perspective. While in Europe the process resulted in homogenous nations, in Africa it gave rise to heterogeneity (cf. Lewis 1983:73; Diamond et al 1988). This heterogeneity in the constitution of the African colonial and post-colonial nation has given rise to conceptual, theoretical and methodological confusion in how to define and analyse the African nation.

The theories of nation formation in generic terms identify two models of nation. These are the *civic* and *ethnic* models. The models in turn are based on two schools of thought, notably the *modernist* and *primordialist* (Smith 1986, 1991; Hutchinson 1994; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990; Anderson 1991; Geertz 1963; Van den Berghe 1978). The markers of the nation in the *civic model* or conception are invariably described as civic institutions, political institutions (parliament, parties, elections, enfranchisement), legal (courts, judges, jury), economic and social institutions that govern society. The binding variables are generated through residing under a centralised politico-legal governance system, with compartmentalised and centralised territory, etc. These civic, social, political, economic, legal administrative institutions glue diverse ethnic groups into an overarching socio-political organisation called nation. Markers of nation in the ethnic model or conception include common descent, common language, common cultural traits (values, norms, special types of dress, food), nativity or indigeneity. *Ethnic nations* are perceived to be objective, natural, fixed, invariable, authentic, reflecting nativity and indigeneity; civic nation are perceived to be secular, territorial, variable and malleable. While the benchmark of the former is heterogeneity, the benchmark of the later is homogeneity. African nations are by definition of the former type.

Eritrea, as a product of Italian colonialism, displays all the features characterising African nations. Equipped with theories of nations and nationalism, Eritrean nationalists embarked on defining, articulating, shaping and constructing Eritrean nationhood (cf. ELF 1971, 1975; EPLF 1977). They located the origin of modern Eritrean nationhood to Italian colonialism: they claimed Eritrean common identity was fostered by resistance to colonisation and occupation (Gebre-Medhin 1989; Iyob 1995; Bereketeab 2007); through their nationalist struggle also they hoped to achieve liberty, equality, democracy and development. This perception of Eritrean nationalism clashed with the perception of Ethiopian nationalism.

The colonially created Eritrea, by necessity, emerged as a poly-ethnic nation. The imperative of poly-ethnic nation is duality of identity. This duality of identity, in terms of nation formation in Eritrea, would be expressed in consisting of supra-ethnic (national) and ethnic (sub-national) identities (Bereketeab 2002, 2007). The ethnic identity represents the composite components of the Eritrean nation, notably the nine ethno-linguistic groups, while the supra-ethnic identity would represent the overarching and overriding national political identity. The two levels, primordial and civic, would define Eritrean identity at the sub-national and national levels respectively. Therefore, theoretically as well as practically, it would be impossible to reduce Eritrean modern national identity to its component primordial roots.

Contested History and Identity: Social Construction and Deconstruction of Mythologies

In a previous section it was suggested that some of the causal factors of the second war relate to history, identity, memories, historical trajectories and narratives, claims and counterclaims of territoriality and nation formation. In this section I deal with some of these factors very briefly. The pre-Italian colonial period is the most contested history in the Eritrean-Ethiopian relations. Two mutually irreconcilable historical narratives are presented, accompanied by strong passion and conviction. For Ethiopian history, Eritrea has invariably been, for the last three-millennium or more, the cradle of its civilisation. Eritreans are by culture, history, geography, and identity inalienably Ethiopian. The fundamental tenet in this discursive historiography is that there has always been a centralised and continuous state known as Ethiopia over those thousands of years that led to a civilisation which included Eritrea. Italy temporarily separated Eritrea from its motherland — Ethiopia. When the Italians were defeated in 1941, the Eritreans rejoined their motherland happily. Few misguided and foreign incited Eritrean separatists waged a secessionist rebellion against union with the mother country. And eventually with the help of Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) Eritrea again broke away (cf. Abbay 1998, 2001; Tadesse 1999; Gudina 2003:58).[3] Following Eritrea's independence, the perception has not changed; as the overwhelming majority of Ethiopians still believe that Eritreans are Ethiopians (cf. Sorenson and Matsouka 2001; Lata 2003).

For the Eritreans, the challenge has been to dismantle this systematically assembled edifice of historiography, which according to them, has become a national ideology (Gebre-Medhin 1989; Habte Selassie 1989; Yohannes 1991;

Iyob 1995). Not only do they question this mythical historiography but they also promote the idea that modern Ethiopia is, as any African state, not least Eritrea, the creation of European imperialism. The Eritrean narrative contends that Ethiopia was created at the end of the 19th century, by an expansionist emperor and with the cooperation of European colonial powers. Many non-Eritrean scholars also subscribe to this narrative (cf. Gudina 2003:59; Bulcha 2002). In the case of the formation of Eritrea itself, Eritreans maintained that modern Eritrea was created by Italian colonialism through surgical assembling of various regions and ethnic groups that had differing status at the end of 19th century with a legitimate entitlement for separate identity and sovereign statehood (Gebre-Medhin 1989; Habte Selassie 1989; Iyob 1995; Bereketeab 2007). This argument, not only refutes the view that Eritrea was part of Ethiopia in the immediate pre-colonial history, but also locates the creation of modern Ethiopia and Eritrea at the same temporal level, at the end of the 19th century. The Eritrean nationalist organisations consistently argued that both Eritrea and Ethiopia were created simultaneously at the end of 19th century (cf. EPLF 1977:6; ELF 1971:17, 1975:13).

Eritrean nationalists describe the pre-colonial history of relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia as that of between raiders and the raided, where a militarily superior power from the Ethiopian side, would cross the border to Eritrea and loot the communities. Sometimes they would leave behind a representative to make sure tributes were levied regularly. These raids were not, of course, limited to what was to become Eritrea; they were also extended as far as Suakin in Sudan (cf. d'Avray 1996:52; see also Basil Davidson 1980; Richard Greenfield 1980). If these raids were to constitute a basis of a legitimate claim, then Ethiopia would rightly claim other territories as well, eastern Sudan, for instance, Eritreans argue.

To shed light on the Eritrean argument and perception, it would be of benefit to highlight a few historical episodes. Oral and written historiographic narratives in Eritrea depict how Ethiopian, and particularly Tigrayan feudal lords, used to cross the Mereb River and pillage property; rape women; massacre men, women, children and the elderly with the aim of terrorising and forcing them to submit to their will. Dejat Wube was remembered by Eritreans as one of the notorious Ethiopian lords. In the 1840s Wube carried out widespread raids causing havoc to Eritrean communities and villages. The raids, at first, focused mainly on the highland and the Massawa areas. In 1848, Wube 'switched operations to the Habab and Barka tribes, pillaging everywhere and carrying off many slaves and livestock' (d'Avray 1996:61). Wube spread his pillaging atrocities throughout Eritrea, which earned him notoriety throughout

the communities. Both in the highland and lowlands of Eritrea, Wube is still depicted, in songs and folk tales, as the cruellest invader of the time. The Tigrinya saying *b'gzie wube z'tzememe wube k'ble nebere* (one who lost hearing at the time of Wube, knows only to utter the word Wube for the rest of his life) demonstrates the lasting impact Wube's aggression had left in the Eritrean memory.

The Kunama also refer to raids of the Tigrayan Ras Alula Abanega which they reminisce as *Alula masa*. Credible accounts recall that slaves and cattle were looted and taken across the border as a result of which the mode of life of the Kunama people was changed and they were compelled to take to farming. In these recurrent raids, usually the adults would fight back; children, the old and women were hidden in caves. In one of these accounts, these caves were described as traps where members of the communities would be simply slaughtered.

> Some Kunama (mostly children, elderly and women) took refuge into caves. The Abyssinians piled up firewood at the entrance of the caves and set fire. They sprinkled chilli known as berbere in Tigrigna and Amharic. The suffocating effect of the smoke and the pepper forced the women to come out of the caves to be victims of the Abyssinian predators (Naty 2001: 577-8).

These acts of aggression and brutality were intended to force the communities into submission. In reflecting these cruelties, thus, the Kunama say when they want to curse a person *alake ebini* meaning 'I curse you that you will be captured by an Abyssinian' (Naty 2001:578).

Before the advent of Italians Ras Alula is the last person to have had any dealings with Eritreans. Pride and heroism, on the one hand, hate and shame on the other characterised Alula's political career. Many Ethiopians (Abbay 1998; Tadesse 1999; Araia 2005) and Western Ethiopianists (Erlich 1982; Rubenson 1976; Punkharst 1964) have contributed in the personality cult making process where Alula is depicted as a person with an extraordinary talent and benevolence (Abbay 1998; Araia 2006). He is remembered as the hero of Dogali who defeated the *ferenji* (white-man) – the Italians, in 1887, where 10 000 Abyssinians under his command decimated 480 Italians (d'Avary 1996:119). He is also portrayed as a man of law and justice who ruled the people of Hamasen with fairness and determination (Abbay 1998; Abraham 2007).

To the Eritreans however, Ras Alula was nothing short of the incarnation of cruelty, mischief, and raids that they suffered from Tigrayan and Ethiopian invaders. Alula frequently raided the lowland communities, locked into fierce

competition with the Anglo-Egyptian and the Mahdi movement in a bid to conquer the lowlands (d'Avray 1996: 99ff). In one such raid of 1886, two-thirds of the Eritrean Kunama and Nara people were presumed to have been annihilated by Alula's invading army (d'Avary 1996:118; Favali and Pateman 2003:36).

Ras Alula ruled the highland of Eritrea for 10 years, 1879-1889, particularly the provinces of Hamasen and Seraye, following the defeat of Rasi Woldenkiel (Bereketeab 2000:81) and his headquarters was in present-day Asmara. This has led to the misguided view by Ethiopians and some Western scholars that Asmara was founded by Alula (Erlich 1982; Abbay 1998). The incontrovertible reality is, however, that Asmara as a town was the creation of the Italians.

The Italians founded Asmara as a modern town. Prior to Italian colonialism Asmara consisted of four tiny villages (Bereketeab 2002). It can be argued that giving the credit for founding Asmara for Alula was part of the Ethiopian myth-creating scheme. It was intended to entrench the view that Eritrea has been invariably part of Ethiopia and legitimising the concomitant claim on Eritrea. While in Ethiopia, Ras Alula is highly celebrated as a hero, Tigrayan Ras, because of his role in fighting the Italians, the Egyptians, the Mahdists, as well as the subjugation of Eritreans; conversely, in Eritrea, he is perceived as a notorious villain who had reigned Hamasen and Seraye with iron-fist for ten years, and frequently pillaged the lowland. Gerald Portal described Alula, when he visited him in 1887, in this way:

> he was a striking man whom we had no difficulty in recognising at once as the dreaded chief, who by courage, ferocity, unscrupulous cruelty, and considerable military ability, had risen from the ranks of the private soldier to the position of generalissimo of the Abyssinian frontier… the owner of the powerful, cruel and intelligent face would be bound to make his name known in any country, either as a leader or as a destroyer of men. But although all these details may be afterwards observed and recalled, attention was at first riveted to one striking peculiarity – a pair of gleaming tawny eyes of a much lighter colour than the skin of the face. To these flashing yellow orbs, whose effect was aided by a brilliant row of white regular teeth, was no doubt due much of the terror with which Ras Alula was generally regarded. I have seen such eyes in the head of a tiger…and of a leopard, but never in that of a human being (cited in d'Avray 1996:109-110).

It was the terror with which Alula ruled the highland of Eritrea that he is remembered. Alula's rule in the Kebessa ceased to exist with the occupation of Eritrea by the Italians. The ambition of Italians to subordinate Abyssinia plunged

them into the battle of Adwa in 1896. The Italians suffering a humiliating defeat which was to leave its impact in the annals of history. A considerable size of Eritrean *askaris* participated forcibly in the battle of Adwa on the side of the invading Italian army.

The victor, Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia, punished cruelly those *askaris*, for siding with the invading Italian army. A right arm and a left leg of those captured were amputated as a punishment for siding with the white man (Wrong 2005: 55). This is further construed by Eritreans as being typical of Ethiopia's barbaric acts against them. When Italy invaded and occupied Ethiopia, 1936-1941, 50 000 Eritreans were presumed to have participated in the military campaign on the side of Italy (Negash 1987:51; Bereketeab 2000:153). This is used by Eritreans as a demonstration that there was no feeling of Ethiopianess among Eritreans. Ethiopians also refer to those Eritreans who deserted the Italian Fascist army and joined the Ethiopian resistance as a proof of the existence of Ethiopian identity in Eritrea.

Even the division of the 1940s within the Eritrean political parties is inter-preted differently. Ethiopians, citing the Eritrean Unionist Party who advocated for union with Ethiopia, claim that Eritreans pursuant to the defeat of Italy demanded the unconditional reunion with their mother country − Ethiopia (see Negash 1987, 1997; Abbay 1998). What is conveniently glossed over is the contradictory and continuous shifts of positions of the party: opting for condi-tional union (revising its unconditional union position), opposition of the Ethio-pian language, Amharic, as the official language of Eritrea, etc. (cf. Trevaskis 1960:117; Markakis 1987:69). Furthermore, opposition against the viola-tions of the federal provisions by members of the Unionist Party, etc. were not also given their due meaning by Ethiopia. Eritreans on their part, quoting just these incidents and by referring to diplomatic sources claim that more than 75 per cent of the Eritrean people stood against Ethiopia, and for independence (cf. Medhanie 1986; Habte Selassie 1989; Fessahatzion 1998; Legesse 2002). Eritreans and Ethiopians also disagree on the meaning and interpre-tation of the UN sponsored federal arrangement. While Eritreans perceive it as endorsing the integrity and continuity of the colonially created territory, Ethio-pians interpret it as acknowledging their claim on Eritrea. Based on this inter-pretation, Ethiopia, eventually abrogated the federation in November 1962. In response to the Ethiopian actions, Eritrean nationalists launched an armed struggle for independence.

The national liberation struggle that began in 1961 was, for Ethiopia, an act of banditry led by few who wanted to sell Eritrea to the Arabs for petrodol-lars (Tareke 2002:476). Both the monarchy and the military junta (the Dergue)

that replaced it depicted the Eritrean liberation fighters as shiftas (bandits),
totally devoid of any support from the general Eritrean population (Wolde Giorgis
1989). For Eritrean nationalists, on the other hand, the struggle was a popu-
lar uprising in the quest for self-determination. Eritreans claimed that as colo-
nial people, they were entitled to have the right to self-determination, which
was wrongly denied them and they interpreted the liberation struggle as an
expression of the non-consummated decolonisation process (Habte Selassie
1989; Bereketeab 2000).

In an act of deconstruction of Ethiopian mythology and reconstruction of
their own myth, Eritrean nationalists therefore defined the pre-Italian colonial
period relations between Eritreans and Ethiopians as the relationship between
the invader the invaded and between the conqueror and the conquered (cf.
ELF 1971, 1975; EPLF 1977). In the Eritrean narrative the treatment of
Eritreans by Wube, Alula, Youhannes, Menelik, Haile Selassie, Mengistu, only
demonstrated the fact that the relationship was not of one people, one iden-
tity, but of domination and resistance. Figures such as Rasi Woldenkiel, Bahta
Hagos, who are vilified by Ethiopians as reneges and bandits are celebrated by
Eritreans as heroes and symbols of Eritrean resistance (Bereketeab 2000:228).
Eritreans argue that this historical trajectory illustrates a continuous conflict
that could hardly be considered to represent the emergence of one people or
common identity. They, further, stressed that the continuous raids indicated
the absence of a cohesive and centralised state structure within which Eritrean
identity could have been located. The significance of these narratives is to be
perceived in the profound contributions they made in the social construction of
differential identity through spatial and cognitive distancing and delineating
from the Other.

When Eritrea achieved its independence, these claims and counter claims,
social construction and deconstruction of mythology have not been resolved
once and for all. This fact, probably, for the second time, constituted cause of
a war. For the majority of Eritreans, the Ethiopian failure to come to terms with
the inexorable reality of Eritrea's independence, and the existence of separate
identity and nationhood destined to exist in the neighbourhood of Ethiopia still
poses a crucial impediment for the normal and healthy relation from develop-
ing between the two countries.

In short both Eritreans and Ethiopians, and friends of respective peoples[4]
have been engaging in the act of social construction and deconstruction with
great passion and determination. Ethiopian myth creation exercise is coun-
tered by Eritrean myth deconstruction and construction exercise. These unre-
solved contestations of history, identity, territoriality; claims and counter-

claims are therefore some of the embedded causal factors of the Ethio-
Eritrean conflict.

Labour Migration: Construction of Socio-psychological Imagining

In addition to the controversy surrounding Eritrean and Ethiopian narratives
related to the pre-Italian colonial period, discussed in the preceding section,
prejudicial social relations induced by an emerging political economy also con-
tributed to a deep-seated social-psychology. A social-psychology whose hall-
mark became a superiority and inferiority complex was produced as a result of
colonialism. Communities of identical pre-colonial socio-economic formation
evolved into diverse formations. The one that fell under colonial rule was influ-
enced by the penetration of colonial political economy, while the other that
escaped colonial penetration retained its pre-colonial socio-economic forma-
tion. This new political economy constituted focus of attraction where many
Tigrayans flowed to Eritrea (Berhe 2004:573). This flow in search of jobs had
negative social dimension that reinforced the superiority-inferiority syndrome.
The first labour migration from Tigray to Eritrea was presumed to have taken
place during 1920s and 1930s. The emerging urban centres and industrial
firms attracted considerable labour force from Tigray. The enrolment of Eritrean
men in the colonial army also created shortage of labour force in Eritrea in the
emerging urban centres as well as rural areas (Trevaskis 1960; Bereketeab
2000:128).

   The literature on labour migration, which also informs this section, details
two factors of migration. These are persecution and economic insecurity. Fur-
ther two — push and pull factors — generating labour migration are provided.
The push factor refers to negative attributes operating from the centre of origin
while the pull refers to positive attributes operating at the centre of destination
(Datta 2004:346). 'The traditional push-pull paradigm stresses that people
are pushed to migrate from a place with poor social, political or economical
conditions and attracted — pulled — to a destination with better living condi-
tions' (Wijk 2008:2). Precisely, these factors pushed and pulled labour mi-
grants from Tigray to Eritrea. Primarily, it was economic insecurity that pushed
them. Similarity of culture, language, religion, geographical and food habits at
the place of destination also facilitated migration.

   As Trevaskis (1960:53) notes 'throughout the Italian regime, landless
immigrant families — mostly from Tigray in Ethiopia — drifted into the plateau
to settle as tenants of absentee landowners'; arguably the flow increased
during the occupation of Ethiopia. This situation provided pull factor for many
Tigrayans (Negash 1987:51) while the abysmal life conditions in Tigray con-

stituted a push factor. Many of the Tigrayans who sought jobs in Eritrea were, however, employed in a low status jobs. Female Tigrayans were primarily employed as maids in Eritrean households under conditions that were generally considered as extremely oppressive and exploitative. Many others also assumed social positions that, according to societal values, maybe perceived as lacking social respectability such as prostitution.

> Ordinary Tigrayans … for many years have taken low paid, low status jobs in Eritrea, as casual labourers and domestic servants. Tigrayans were denigrated as 'agame'-a term that implied that they were all uncouth peasants. Most Tigrayan men working in Eritrea were hired as labourers, some got work slaughtering farm animals, while others took up jobs as woodcutters, potters and shepherds. Women were hired as waitresses, housemaids and washer-women. Many prostitutes in Asmara were Tigrayans (Plaut 2004:18).

Even those Eritrean women that went into prostitution seemed to nurse feelings of superiority over their Tigrayan colleagues (the *agame*).

Overall those who moved to the urban centres could mainly be employed as manual labourers. This is not to say that Eritreans were given good jobs, yet in many ways, Eritreans fared better than their Tigrayan counterparts. The male population in rural Eritrea were lured to the colonial political economy. They abandoned their farms and cattle and streamed to centres of employment in the private and public sector as well as the colonial army.[5] This generated acute shortage of manpower. Emigrant Tigrayans who worked as paid farm labourers and cattle tenders compensated for this shortage of manpower. They worked in serf-like conditions on the farms of a household where the adult male was absent as well as in well-to-do households where the master of the house could afford to hire servants. It was common to brag that one had an *agame,*[6] a servant. The relation between the *agame* and the household was paradoxical, mostly based on a kind of egalitarianism. The household will, in paternalistic sense, care about the welfare of the *agame*. He (usually is a male) will be given a small resting place, food and clothes, small payment. There might also be occasions where the household will arrange a wife for him. In exchange the *agame* is expected to serve his masters loyally, and show respect and obedience as a sign of his gratitude. Beneath the politeness, obedience could, however, be disguised deep-rooted bitterness, resentment and anger, which could explode any time. Many committed crimes and ran away, others kept their rage in control, to revenge at a convenient time (many had their revenge during Ethiopian rule − the Monarchy and the Dergue − while serving in the Ethiopian security forces). Yet there were many who became 'citizens' of villages. When they had built their own family and had

lived long enough they were given land and accepted as members of the village assuming the connotation of *deki-arba'a* (literally meaning the sons of forty years). The 'forty' denotes the time limit of forty years of continuous residence in the village in order to be afforded 'citizenship' (Nadel 1946).

The Fascist invasion of Ethiopia in 1936 changed, temporarily, the political map of Eritrea. Until the defeat of Italy, in 1941, Eritrea was expanded to Great Eritrea, which included Tigray (Negash 1987:157). The joining of Tigray with Eritrea paved the way for free movement of Tigrayans to Eritrea. This opportunity was exploited to the maximum, and many Tigrayans migrated to Eritrea during this period. Notwithstanding, the creation of Great Eritrea, the Italians were determined to make sure that the Eritreans would have certain privileges.

> The Eritreans were better clothed, enjoyed a greater consumption of goods, and had access to a way of life considered superior, as well as greater access to the benefits of modern, albeit extremely limited, schooling, than that enjoyed by their Ethiopian counterparts (Negash 1987:154-5).

This further widened the gap between Eritreans and Tigrayans that the overall state of development followed diverging course.

> At the beginning of the 1930's Eritrea with its urban centres, its considerable wage earning population combined with an increased purchasing power was considered as a more developed (or in the colonial parlance as more civilized) than the rest of Ethiopia (Negash 1987:155).

Ethiopia, and particularly Tigray, remained poor and backward. The abject poverty in Tigray compelled many Tigrayans to cross to the relatively well-off Eritrea and were ready to take any job. Those who were not fortunate enough to get jobs were engaged in collecting the 'poor man's food', that is, *beles* (cactus fruit), earning them the nickname of *agame aray beles* (agame the collector of beles). By selling the beles that they collected in Eritrean towns (Asmara in particular) they were able to save some money and send back home. Those who saw money coming from Eritrea thought that there was fortune to be exploited, further increasing the flow of poor Tigrayan peasants to Eritrea.

During the 1970s there were scenes of Tigrayan males trekking (Berhe 2004:573) along the highways all the way from the highland to the lowland of Eritrea to work as seasonal labourers in the cotton plantation of Ali Gidir, in the Tesseney area. At the end of the rainy season they will be seen again trekking back to their home country the same way they came through, this time also instead of taking busses they used to walk for weeks or ask for lifts to save the money they earned, further earning them nicknames such as *agame*

komal (lousy), *bekak* (stingy). Many died out of starvation, exhaustion and malaria. Many stories abound depicting how money was found sewed under the ragged clothes of the dead, money they could use for fares or to buy food. Instead they preferred to almost starve themselves to death in order to secure a better life-back home. Such stories were common among Eritreans in those days. Indeed they were recounted as a source of entertainment.

All this has contributed very much to constructing of an image of stereotypes and prejudices that Tigrayans are inferior, destitute, mischievous, etc. Conversely, it has spawned a deep resentment in the people of Tigray (Berhe 2004:573) that could explain the ferocity with which the second war was fought and the intensity of the hate propaganda witnessed (cf. Sorenson and Matsouka 2001) (I will deal with this in some details later).

With this micro-sociological analysis in mind, I further highlight the socio-psychological mindset of people both in Eritrea and Tigray (also Ethiopia at large), which had a profound effect on relations between Eritreans and Tigrayans, which in turn, had significant implication for the conflict.

Paradoxes in the Eritrean Perception of Self-Identity

If primordial factors are to be taken as measurements of national identity claims, indeed, the picture could be completely chaotic. The various ethno-linguistic groups in Eritrea could with great certainty claim some kind of primordial affiliation with their immediate neighbours across the political boundary. We could have the following affiliations: the Afars with their kins in Ethiopia and Djibouti; the Saho, the Kunama, Tigrinya with those in Ethiopia; the Beni Amir, Hidareb, Rashaida with those in the Sudan (cf. Longrigg 1945; Trevaskis 1960). And still others claim descent from across the Red Sea, the Arab Peninsula, as descendents of the Prophet Mohammed (cf. Bereketeab 2000, 2002; Pool 2001). This phenomenon is not, however, peculiar to Eritrea as it obtains in other parts of Africa. For example, Somalis are divided between Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Kenya; the Oromos between Ethiopia and Kenya; the Beni Shangul/Nuer/Anjuak between Sudan and Ethiopia, etc.

If we take the case of Eritrean Tigrinya speakers there is no doubt they could rightly refer to primordial affiliation, in terms of language, religion, tradition, etc, with the Tigray people in Ethiopia. Historically, no one could refute the fact that the highland of Eritrea including the historical port of Adulis was the hub of the Axumite Kingdom (cf. Trimingham 1952:33; Rubenson 1976). Notwithstanding this, however, as Trevaskis (1960:10-11) notes, 'Italy created Eritrea by an act of surgery: by severing its different peoples from those with whom their past had been linked, and by grafting the amputated remnants to

each other under the title of Eritrea'. Indisputably, the pillars of Axumite Kingdom were Axum, as the seat of the political power, and Adulis, as the main gate and centre of international trade. Many archaeological relics in places like Metera and Tekonda'e incontrovertibly illustrate the highland of Eritrea was a cradle of the Axumite civilisation that saw its demise by the 7th century A. D.

Modern Eritrean history and identity is, however, political history and identity as any colonially created entities that goes beyond primordiality. Eritreans in general and the liberation fronts in particular never refuted such primordial connections with peoples on the other side of the geo-political border. Nevertheless, for Eritrean nationalists historical connection is one thing and present reality is another. The indisputable fact is that modern Eritrea is a colonial creation as any colonial African nation (Bereketeab 2007). Accordingly, claims of identities that trace to history and ancient civilisation, often made by Ethiopia, and any endeavour to apply it to contemporary life, would not only defy reality but also inexorably lead to chaos and tragedy. It was this realisation that induced the founders of the OAU to declare the colonial borders sacrosanct.

This acknowledgement however would not diminish the fact that the social construction of modern Eritrean identity is replete with paradoxes and ambiguities when it concerns its primordial pedigree. This is particularly true with the Tigrinya ethno-linguistic group. Eritrean folkloric narratives are replete with proverbs and anecdotes that depict Tigrayans as deceitful, malicious, dishonest, full of intrigues, etc. At the same time there are proverbs and claims that Tigrinya speakers, and for that matter Tigre of the Habab and Mensa'e tribes, are of the same blood as Tigrayans. Let me begin with the first category (the perception of the Tigrinyans) to illustrate the paradoxes.

The road between Adi Tekelezan and Ela Ber'ed, along the highway of Asmara-Keren, Eritrea, is called *I'bi Tigray* meaning the heart of Tigray. The road is zigzag shaped and very treacherous. The reason it is called *I'bi Tigray* is to describe how difficult it is to find out how or what a Tigrayan thinks and how treacherous he/she is. The name of the road metaphorically represents what Eritreans think and feel about Tigrayans.

This perception has been so widespread that even Arab residents of Eritrea had to contribute to this perception through construction of corrupt form of hybrid of Arabo-Tigrinya proverbs. Such proverbs include expressions such as: *Mata'emen Al Tigraway wala ashera mara yekun hiyaway* (do not trust a Tigrayan even if he is ten times generous/honest), *mata'emen al agame wala intemote wala intehameme* (do not trust an *agame* even if he is dead or sick). Apparently those Arab residents, particularly of Asmara, had picked some of the

prejudices and stereotypes of the Tigrinya speakers. This is clearly demon-
strated in the perverted or corrupted language mixture of Arabic and Tigrinya in
the cited statements. Nevertheless, it depicts the popular apprehension of
Tigrayans.

Conversely, there are proverbs that, in some ways, revered blood of a
Tigrayan. Proverbs like *kab tigrai zei w'led ai kabti ai kapti* (one who has no
Tigrayan blood has to be no one). Religious shrines located in Axume, Tigray,
are also some of the coveted places. Many Eritrean Christians crave to visit
Mariam Tzion, particularly the anniversary celebration. It is worth noting here
that we observe two parallel processes of defining simultaneously two forms of
identity notably, modernist (civic) and primordial (ethnic). The first refers to
the current colonially engendered political supra-ethnic Eritrean identity while
the second refers to historical mythology and primordiality that relate to a
particularistic ethnic sub-national identity. It is this primordial conception of
identity that constitutes the basis of 'Ethiopianess' of Eritreans according to
Great Ethiopia scholars and Tigray-Tigringi ethno-nationalists (cf. Abbay 1998;
Tadesse 1999; Negash 1998). The fallacies underlying the primordialist per-
ception of identity is its denial of the reality that identities are multifaceted,
and that modern identity is civic rather than ethnic (cf. Smith 1986). Eritrean
modern identity is based on duality. The allusion to the civic, to the overarching
supra-ethnic political identity, which is the outcome of the colonial and nation-
alist struggle processes, on the other hand is how Eritrean nationalists would
like to define and perceive their Eritreanhood. These two premises comple-
ment in defining Eritrean national identity (Bereketeab 2000, 2004). Appar-
ently the civic and ethnic (primordialist) sources of identity explain the para-
doxes in Eritrean perception of their identity.

The Tigray-Eritrea Nexus

As mentioned earlier, one of the constituents of the complexity of the Eritrea-
Ethiopia conflict relates to the Tigray-Eritrea-nexus dimension. Whatever po-
litical relationship existed in the immediate pre-colonial period was perma-
nently and irretrievably severed. Hence the so-called irredentism that followed
the demise of Italian colonialism in Eritrea extended beyond the glory of his-
torical Tigray. The Unionist Party deriving from an instrumentalist conception
cast its net of rapprochement with the Shewan dominated Ethiopia, while the
Liberal Progressive Party motivated by its contention of the colonially produced
new Eritrean identity opted for an annexionist strategy-annexing Tigray into
the prospective independent Eritrea than vice versa (Bereketeab 2007:150).

For the Tigrayans on the other hand the severing of the Tigrinya speaking Eritreans by Italy, and more significantly the acquiescence of the Shewan Emperor, Menelik II, to get hold of that territory by the vanquished Italians following their humiliation in the battle of Adwa, in 1896, became a bitter pill to swallow. Emperor Menelik's failure to pursue his success in the battle of Adwa to banish Italian presence in Eritrea was seen as mischievous act intended to divide the Tigrinya speakers as a consequence of which was intended to deprive the rightful heir from ascending to the Ethiopian throne. This conspiratorially informed view is widely accepted among those who believe that the Tigrinya *ethnie* were one people. Further, it derives from the view that until the death of Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889), the imperial power belonged to the Tigrayans. It was argued that Menelik, petrified by the thought that the throne might pass to Yohannes' legitimate successor, Luul Mengesha, and therefore, to undermine any opposition by a united Tigrinya speakers, conspired to divide them. The argument goes that the easiest way to do this was to make sure that the Mereb-Milash remained the property of Italy (cf. Berhe 1993:9; Abbay 1998).

The Tigrayans have always perceived the failure of Emperor Menelik II to push the Italians out of Eritrea as Amhara tactics of divide and rule, and Eritrea, and particularly the Tigrinya speakers, as the lost section of Tigray that has to be regained. This understanding has led many Tigrayans to deny the emergence of supra-ethnic Eritrean identity at the end of Italian colonial rule. The Tigrinya elite were presented as manifesting Tigray-Tigrigni[7] identity that negated any Eritrean identity (cf. Abbay 1998, 2001; Tekeste 1997, 1987:163-4; Lata 2003). Alemseged Abbay (1998:30) writes,

> the different *ethnies* that were brought together by the Italians did not see one another as Eritreans. As such, they did not struggle for a common political roof. Because there were no 'Eritreans,' there was no political party in the *kebessa* that seriously attempted to 'make' Eritrea in the territory north of the Mereb. For *kebessa* elites creating 'Eritrea' first and 'Eritreans' next looked an impossible dream of putting the cart before the horse.

This *Tigray-Tigrigni* irredentism, up to this time systematically engaged in misrepresentation of the fact of the 1940s. Its argument flies in the face of many facts. Firstly, it glosses over the fact that there were two parties representing the kebessa elite. The Liberal Progressive Party (LPP), the smaller of the two, like the Moslem League (ML) demonstrated strong irredentist tendencies (Bereketeab 2000:264). Unlike the Tigrayan *Tigray-Tigrigni* irredentism, the LPP (Eritrean) *Tigray-Tigrigni* irredentism departs from the perception of a

development of a separate Eritrean identity. Its irredentism rested on the pursuit of joining of a part that was left behind when Italian colonialism created Eritrea. It advocated for the creation of a sovereign Eritrea that included Tigray. It strove to join Tigray with the multi-ethnic 'mother land' Eritrea, it even convinced the Moslem League (ML) to accept the incorporation of Tigray (Bereketeab 2000:161). For sure this endeavour was based on its conviction that the two Tigrinyans were bound by primordial affiliations such as language, religion, culture, history. This (the LPP's advocacy for greater Eritrea) has given reason for many Tigrayan scholars to present as evidence of the Eritrean elites' belief of Eritreans Tigrayaness (cf. Abbay 1998; Lata 2003). What they failed to tell is that LPP wanted to join Tigray to Eritrea not vice versa. The LPP's irredentism thus sought to bring in a part that was left behind. This was corroborated by the BMA report of 1944 when it noted:

> In the first place there is the sentimental attachment to the Tigrai – the consciousness of racial and economic unity, and the memory of a long common history. But the Eritreans are strongly conscious of the separate identity of Eritrea, and the ethnic affinity with Ethiopia ends at the border of the Tigrinya block (FO 371-41531, October 1944).

The paradoxical nature of the Tigrayan *Tigray-Tigrigni* irredentism was clearly presented in the propaganda that was unleashed in conjunction with the outbreak of the second war (1998-2000), and in which case Eritreans were depicted as chauvinists, arrogant and displaying superior race mentality against Tigrayans (later about this, in the section on Ethiopian Elites on Eritrean Superiority Complex). This contradictory perception of Eritreans, where, on the one hand, they are perceived as lacking Eritrean national identity, and on the other, as harbouring a collective Eritrean chauvinism, superiority mentality, etc., depicts the duplicity of Tigrayan *Tigray-Tigrigni* irredentism. This could draw our attention to the fact that instead of cultural/primordial factors, political and economic considerations guide the Tigrayan *Tigray-Tigrigni* irredentism.

The second party, the Unionist Party (UP), was the largest party and was against the idea of *Tigray-Tigrigni* and wanted a unified Eritrea to join Ethiopia. The idea of unified Eritrea was based on the notion of Eritrean territoriality, it believed in the existence of a territory called Eritrea that encapsulated different ethno-linguistic groups. A demonstration of this was the shock the president of the UP felt in the New York meeting in 1949 when they were confronted by the acceptance of the Ethiopian representative of the division of Eritrea along religio-geographic lines, notably that highland Christians should join Ethiopia while the lowland Moslems should join Sudan (Tesfai 2001:382). The UP believes therefore not only in the assumption that there was no Eritrean

identity but also in the assumption of the Eritrean Tigrinya's Tigrayan identity. The acrimonious exchange between the UP leader, Tedla Bairu, and member of the LPP, Woldeab Wodemariam, in the *wa'ala* Bet Giorgis in 1946, where the former admonished the latter saying that he should not interfere in the internal affairs of Eritrea, because he was a Tigrayan (Tesfai 2001:182), illustrates how the Party that presumably represented the majority of the Tigrinya speakers, in fact, bypassed Tigray and flirted with the Shewa dominated Ethiopia. This could, further, be taken as demonstrative of the prevalence of distinctive Eritreaness seeking to safeguard its interest through joining Shewan dominated Ethiopia.

When it comes to Menelik's 'abdication of ownership' of Eritrea, Eritreans have a different understanding. Unlike the Tigrayan perception and interpretation discussed earlier, Eritreans believe that Menelik acquiesced to jettisoning Eritrea on two occasions because he was of the view that the territory did not belong to him (his realm). He has been using it as bargaining chip with the Italians to consolidate his powers with an eye on the south of Ethiopia. Why Menelik was more interested in south Ethiopia than Eritrea is explained in this way:

> Emperor Menelik readily yielded to Italian pressure to colonize Eritrea because his eyes were on another colonial prize, namely, south Ethiopia. That region was rich with huge stretches of fertile land, rain forests filled with high-grade lumber, coffee that grows wild, as well as gold, ivory, civet, spices and slaves. That and the 'fortress Ethiopia' mentality that caused the highlanders to cherish their mountain fastnesses and to avoid living in the lowlands, were the principal reason why Ethiopia never became an important player in the semi-desert regions of the Red Sea littoral during the colonial era. Again and again the Ethiopian Emperors – Tewodros (Theodore), Yohannes IV (John), and Menelik II – showed that their strategy was more terrestrial than maritime. On land they were credible adversaries for the European and Turko-Egyptian colonialists, at sea they were weak, or absent, or distracted by other ventures at those crucial moments when the colonial takeover of the coast was taking place (Legesse 2002:2).

Although the conspiratorially informed thesis of Menelik's scheme to divide the Tigrinya ethno-linguistic group (nation) might hold true to certain degree, yet, it obliterates the mythology of Ethiopian state existing continuously for more than three millennia. In other words Menelik was earnestly engaged in state building activities and thereby confirming the Eritrean claim that both modern Eritrea and Ethiopia are creation of capitalist colonial era.

The 1976 TPLF Manifesto is to be construed from the primordially in-
formed ethnicist criteria of identity perspective as well as from expansionist
political and economic calculations. It was not a matter of coincidence that the
Manifesto included all Tigrinya speakers and even the Saho, the Kunama, and
the Afar in the prospective republic of Tigray (more about this in the next
section). This claim is made on the basis of selective constructivist reading of
historiography, mythology, and hegemony, aiming at glorifying the greatness
of Tigray by promoting a master narrative. From the perspective of pragmatic
politics, therefore, for the TPLF, Eritrea constitutes a vital component of their
existence, regardless whether they opt for independence or stay within Ethio-
pia. The conflict between the EPLF and TPLF of the 1976 and 1984 based on
this calculation was not resolved when the two governments resumed their
relation in the post-liberation period, which many observers consider as seri-
ous mistake.

There is a serious doubt concerning the validation of the primordial school
of thought from where the *Tigray-Tigrigni* scholars and politicians draw their
impetus for the assumption of a union of the Tigrinya speakers of Eritrea and
Tigray. Indeed, in its extreme form, the school was tainted by philosophies
that gave rise to extreme racial politico-social ideologies. German Romanti-
cism giving birth to Hitlerean Nazism, Zionism paving way for the conception
of chosen people, Boer Puritanism rationalising the notorious apartheid sys-
tem are some of the examples that doctrinaire primordialism is associated
with regarding the notion of modern identity. In the African context notions
such as nativity and autochthony (cf. Marshall-Fratani 2007:32; Nzongola-
Ntalaja 2007:72-3) have contributed to heinous acts of atrocities in countries
such as Ivory Coast and Rwanda. Although the reason behind the *Tigray-
Tigrigni* scholars cum politicians' construction of identity is not merely primor-
dial Puritanism it has been deployed as an instrument to serve the greater
Tigray agenda. It rather serves as a façade for political purposes. Tigray needs
Eritrea for its political survival.

Exactly for the opposite reasons, Eritreans praise the modernist school of
thought since it gives legitimacy and offers a rational explanation for the con-
ception of their national identity as a basis of their political identity engen-
dered through colonial rule. Political identity in modern poly-ethnic societies is
necessarily defined and guided by civic affiliation (see Gellner 1983; Anderson
1991; Smith 1986; Hobsbawm 1990). It is a paradigmatic reality that, not
only Eritreans, but all post-colonial societies as well as modern Western soci-
eties rest on civic identity for their nationhood. In this respect it will not be
difficult to understand the claim that the EPLF rejected TPLF's struggle for

independence of Tigray because it could complicate its own ambition of inde-
pendence of Eritrea (cf. Tadesse 1999).

This primordialist vs. modernist conception of identity, beyond academic
debate, has far-reaching practical political consequences. The former as ad-
vocated by Tigray ethno-nationalists constitutes a serious threat to Eritrean
sovereignty. The current cry of many Tigrayan intellectuals (Araya Gelowdowes,
Alemseged Abbay, Medhane Tadesse, etc.) to renegotiate the referendum of
1993 through which Eritrea became formally independent; Algiers Agreement
that defined the premises of delineating and demarcating of the border, EEBC
delimitation and demarcation ruling aiming at either reincorporating the whole
or annexing the ports of Eritrea, though based on primordially defined percep-
tion of identity, demonstrates how Tigrayan political survival is intimately con-
nected with Eritrea (Fessehatzion 1999:229). Tekie Fessahatzion (1999:233)
claims that the Tigrayan perception that Eritrea should serve the interest of
Greater Tigray drove them to sabotage the 1993 Agreement between Asmara
and Addis Ababa,

> Tigray subverted the meaning and spirit of the 1993 Agreement in three
> key areas: preventing people from moving freely across the border;
> uprooting people from their land without due process; and erecting trade
> barriers to limit the movement of Eritrean goods into Ethiopia through
> Tigray.

This subversion referred to here relates to the 'Friendship and Cooperation
Agreement' signed in July 1993 that entailed five points whose contents in-
clude free movements of people, goods and capital (Mengisteab and Yohannes
2005:229-30).

To sum up, the Tigray-Eritrea relation constitutes one aspect of the Eritrean-
Ethiopian conflict. Although linguistic, religious, ethnic, cultural (primordial
premises) and historical ties between Tigray and Eritrea account for the com-
plicated causes of the war, the precarious political position of Tigray in Ethio-
pia also plays a significant role in the perception of Eritrea's imperative in-
volvement in the Ethiopian polity. This imperative compels Tigrayans to yearn
to get hold of Eritrea thus giving rise to two levels of causality of the conflict.

EPLF and TPLF Relations

In this section, I shift my focus away from relationship between two societies
to one that existed between two movements. It is true that at certain point in
time the two Fronts acting as vanguards of the struggles represented their
respective people. However, not only it is possible, but also important to make
distinction between the Fronts and the peoples because there have always

been groups at the margins that neither belong to the Eritrean People's Lib-
eration Front (EPLF) nor the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), but
were members of respective societies.

The common view that the EPLF and TPLF relationship, during the libera-
tion struggle, was based absolutely on friendly terms was a gross misrepre-
sentation of reality. Indeed, it was characterised by deep-rooted differences
(as was displayed in their dispute in 1976 and 1984) and was guided through
a pragmatic tactical interests (Tareke 2002:496). The secrecy and lack of
transparency that characterised the relationship, however, invoked deep sus-
picion, particularly, on the Eritrean side, where many became apprehensive of
the EPLF-TPLF relation, giving rise to various interpretations. This section
discusses this aspect of their relationship, the controversy surrounding it, and
the unresolved problems that were transferred to the post-liberation period
constituting component elements of the cause of the second war.

When the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) launched armed libera-
tion struggle in 1975 to liberate Tigray from Ethiopia, it received crucial sup-
port from the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). According to Aregawi
Berhe (1993:28-29), 20 out of the 45 men constituting the nucleus of TPLF's
liberation fighters were sent to EPLF's rear base, in Sahil, for military training.
When they completed their military training they were sent back to Tigray
accompanied by an EPLF veteran fighter of Tigrayan origin by the name Mehari
Tekle to serve as a military leader in the emergent liberation organisation. The
first batch which was trained by the EPLF, the future senior TPLF leaders and
latter EPRDF government leaders include: Abay Tzehaye, Siye Abraha, Awalom
Weldu, Agazi, Seyum Mesfin, Aregawi Berhe (Drar 1999:7; Berhe 2004:586).

Nevertheless, already, in 1976, due to the TPLF's Manifesto of that year,
relations between the two organisations suffered serious setbacks. The Mani-
festo contained two crucial points that the EPLF strongly opposed. The first
was the sudden change in the TPLF's objective from struggling for a demo-
cratic Ethiopia to the creation of an independent republic of Tigray. The sec-
ond was its definition of the people of Tigray and the territoriality upon which
the prospective Greater Tigray republic was to be established; both were ele-
ments that proved to be antithesis of the colonially created Eritrean politico-
territorial entity. The definition of Tigrayans included all those who speak
Tigrinya, which means including the highland Tigrinya speakers of Eritrea and
the border communities (Kunama, Saho and Afar). Whereas the territoriality
of the Greater Tigray republic presumably was to be founded on the territory
that coincided with the rule of Emperor Yohannes IV that included the ten-year
(1879-1889) Rasi Alula reign of the highland of Eritrea. The ambition, as

expressed in the Manifesto, to create a greater Tigray was thus perceived by EPLF as dangerous and became the cause for the rapture of the relation (Schlee 2003:383). Some attribute the opposition of the EPLF to the establishment of republic of Tigray to be motivated by its fear that it could complicate the Eritrean struggle for independence (Berhe 1993:30; Tadesse 1999). This complication of Eritrean independence would only constitute one dimension of the crucial problem entailed in the TPLF Manifesto. Yet, those who subscribe to the view of complicating Eritrean independence, allude to the problem that might arise to get Ethiopian consent for Eritrea's secession, if Tigray was to opt for independence. This view seems to be oblivious of the second implication of the Manifesto, notably dismantling Eritrea (Bereketeab 2009). Following the disruption of EPLF-TPLF relations, the latter began cooperation with another rival Eritrean organisation, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) which lasted until 1979 (Tadesse 1999:74; Lata 2003:373). After almost three years that the TPLF had severed relations with ELF it patched its difference with EPLF again. The restoration of relation was facilitated by the TPLF's supposed revision of its position on the Tigrayan struggle. According to Lata (2003:373), in 1979, 'the TPLF re-designated the Tigrayan question as a "national question"'. This re-designation re-positioned the Tigrayan struggle as an internal Ethiopian problem that has to be resolved through democratic reconfiguration of the Ethiopian Empire State. However, the EPLF-TPLF relation was disrupted in 1984 again.

This time the reasons for the break up of relations were: (i) ideological (the TPLF wanted the EPLF to condemn the Soviet Union as social-imperialist); (ii) military strategy (the TPLF were against the permanent rear base of the EPLF, it wanted the EPLF to convert itself into mobile units); (iii) issue of creation of a republic of Tigray (again the issue of an independent Tigray resurfaced); and (iv) the issue of nationalities (cf. Young 1996; Schlee 2003; Tadesse 1999). The fourth issue constituted very serious point of difference from the Eritrean perspective. In a way it was reminiscent of the 1976 TPLF Manifesto. The very foundation of the Eritrean struggle was anti-colonial and establishment of an independent poly-ethnic Eritrea. Here the TPLF comes and tells the EPLF to adopt the right for self-determination of nationalities within Eritrea itself. Moreover, it 'supported the right of the Eritrean Afar to secede, and further, supported the concept of an 'Afar triangle' incorporating those of Eritrea' (Schlee 2003:384). This was perceived by Eritreans as an assault on the very foundation of the Eritrean colonially created entity. It also put a question mark on the TPLF's sincerity of its commitment and unequivocal support of Eritrean independence.

In 1988, the disrupted relation between the EPLF and TPLF was restored, and continued to be characterised by amicable concordance until 1997. Yet the TPLF continued providing sanctuary to small Eritrean groups opposed to the EPLF, an act that could be easily interpreted to mean that the TPLF had a secret agenda. The Eritrean Liberation Front – Central Command (ELF-CC), also popularly known as Sagem, and the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrea (DMLE), both breakaway factions of the mainstream ELF, moved to Tigray, a stronghold of the TPLF in the 1980s. This took place when the relationship between the EPLF and TPLF was constrained. The restoration of relationship before independence and the cordial relations between the two governments after independence should have motivated the TPLF and, later, the Ethiopian government to sever relations with these groups. But they were given save heaven by the TPLF.

What is interesting to note is that when the TPLF severed relations with the EPLF, in the mid-1980s, it convened a seminar of Eritreans in Khartoum, Sudan, and told them bluntly that the existing Eritrean organisations were not progressive. They also told them their organisations were undemocratic, non-Marxist-Leninists, etc. and that, they (the Eritreans) should form a new organisation. The 'TPLF said that the EPLF was not democratic' (Tadesse 1999:81). The call for the formation of an alternative organisation, in the image of the TPLF, was perceived as anti-Eritrean, because many Eritreans believed that it was a move to weaken their nationalist struggle. Indeed, many Eritreans construed it as TPLF's tactics to destroy the Eritrean organisations one by one. TPLF's involvement in the destruction of the ELF in the 1980/81 intra-Eritrean civil war, and now the call for the creation of an alternative organisation was not reassuring for Eritreans. Many understood the assertive position of the TPLF not only as a desire to change its position as a junior partner, but also an attempt, in a disguised way, to retune the Eritrean question in a manner that serves the interest of Tigray, as the current Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Mr. Meles Zenawi also in various occasions was alleged to have asserted (Tesfai 1999:223; Fessehatzion 1999:229).

Furthermore, keeping the Eritrean groups in Tigray, and later the creation of new ethnic Eritrean organisations (Kunama and Afar) after the outbreak of the second war (1998-2000) has given rise to speculations that the TPLF had a hidden agenda. What is also interesting is that these client groups adopted the TPLF's vision of right to self-determination up to and including secession of ethnic groups. This behaviour of the TPLF was construed as epitomising the TPLF's long-term twin strategy, and its readiness to use any Eritrean group that is ready to be manipulated.

Following the second war, the TPLF-led Ethiopian government played a significant role in the creation of the Eritrean Alliance of National Forces (EANF) that was formed around November 1998 (later changed name to Eritrean Democratic Alliance-EDA). The TPLF saw in it great political expediency to patch its differences with its archenemies, ELF groups, whom it humiliated and defeated during the 1980s (cf. Tadesse 1999:64f). The People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) government also mended its relations with Ethiopian opposition groups, particularly, with the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).

In conclusion, one can say that, the bumpy relations between the EPLF and TPLF during the liberation struggle had its positive and negative dimensions. The positive dimension was that it enabled the materialisation of the hopes and aspirations of both peoples. The negative dimension is that it further entrenched the socio-psychological perceptions and imaginations by further deepening the suspicions and mistrusts. The fundamental points of schism that caused the rupture of the relations between the two fronts in 1976 and 1984 were neither discussed in earnest nor resolved when the relation was mended in 1988. Priority was given to the defeat of the Dergue. Therefore the points of difference were simply transferred to the post-liberation period where it could be said eventually they contributed to the outbreak of the war in 1998.

Post-Independence Relations

The foregoing section highlighted that serious differences that appeared during the liberation period were not properly addressed. The 1976 and 1984 ruptures of relation between the EPLF and TPLF were caused by profound differences whose roots and resolutions were never properly discussed. It was clear that the restoration of the alliance was pragmatically driven, intended to employ combined efforts to defeat the military regime in Addis Ababa. Not to dwell on their differences might have been considered, at the time, prudent. A crucial question that should have been grappled with, following independence was; on what foundation was the post-independence relation of the two governments to be based? Given the precarious relation of the EPLF and TPLF in the past and the seriousness of some of the points of difference, addressing this question should have been given an utmost priority, particularly by the Eritrean side.

Many Eritreans wonder why the EPLF, taking into consideration its experience with TPLF and the underlying profound issues of differences, did not show extreme prudence in its post-independence dealings with the Ethiopian

government. Moreover, why they were given mixed signals from the EPLF/ PFDJ government regarding calls for confederation that would make borders irrelevant and which had given reason for Ethiopian scholars (definitely also politicians) to assume that a political union was in the pipeline.[8] Many Eritreans resented that clear separation between the two governments, already in 1993, have not taken place. There are also those who believe that it might have been much easier to delimit and demarcate the border at the time. Many citizens of both countries received the close relations of the two governments with great apprehension.[9] Critics argue that the major shortfalls of the amicable relation was that it was not anchored in institutions and popular support, but rather on the guerrilla organisations that ascended to power through the barrel of a gun, and more precisely on the personal good relationship between leaders (Mengisteab and Yohannes 2005; Negash and Tronvoll 2000). National institutions like the parliament, the judiciary, the press, civil society bodies were not properly informed and involved. Decisions were carried out by limited circles. When problems began to emerge also they were kept secret from the public.

Already in 1993 there were reports of simmering problems in the border areas, particularly in the Badme region. Eritrean villagers were harassed by local Tigrayan officials and forced to leave their houses and land on the pretext that the land their houses were built on and the land they were farming were Tigrayan territories (Fessahatzion 2002, 1999:233; Tesfai 1999:220). These problems successively grew in intensity until the outbreak of the war in May 1998. Yet these problems were effectively concealed from the public and mass media.

The fact that relations between the two governments began to deteriorate abruptly in conjunction with the announcement of issuance of the Eritrean currency in May 1997 gave rise to views that the relation was founded on false expectations. It has now become a commonplace knowledge that the two governments had different expectations from their post-independence relations (cf. Lata 2003; Abbink 2003). The Eritrean government is believed to have been much interested in the economic aspect of the relationship. As such it is presumably believed that it pushed for optimal exploitation of the Ethiopian market. This led to scholars sympathetic to Ethiopia to talk about, 'the Ethiopian regime's ambiguous and perhaps naïve political dealings with Eritrean government and of giving it too many political and economic advantages after 1993' (Abbink 2003:227).

Proponents of the view of different expectations further argue that the Ethiopian government on the other hand was very much concerned with the political

dimension of the relation. They maintain that the Ethiopian government was indeed aiming at through its open economic policy to trap Eritrea in a state of political dependency. Trivelli (quoted in Lata 2003:377) notes:

> The TPLF Leadership… hoped that the benefits of the economic privileges given to Eritrea and Eritreans would ultimately induce or even force the Eritrean leadership to re-enter into some form of political union with Ethiopia.

Therefore, insofar as Eritrea was not sliding away from Ethiopia, it was tolerated when using the Ethiopian market to its advantage. According to this view that was why when Eritrea indicated going its way, asserting its political sovereignty – pursuing an independent foreign policy, introducing its own currency (of high symbolic value of its political independence) – the relationship began to radically deteriorate (cf. Fessahatzion 2002). The fact that the rupture in the relationship was connected with the launching of the Eritrean currency was seen by some observers as a clear indication of how the TPLF position of the Eritrean independence was driven by tactical calculation,

> However, private musings by TPLF leaders and some of their one-sided policies towards Eritrea indicate their expectation that this independence would be either temporary or would at least be subordinated to the two groups' long range joint economic and security interests (Lata 2003:374).

Lata (2003:377) further continues, 'The Ethiopian Prime Minister offhandedly informed me of his expectations that Eritrea will imminently rejoin Ethiopia, although the form of such a link was not put as explicitly'. This expectation of Meles was expressed in 1992, that is, over a year after the de facto and a year before the de jure independence. A similar expectation was also expressed by Meles in an interview with Paul Henz in just before the EPRDF assumed power in 1991.

> We look at this (Eritrea's independence) from the viewpoint of the interests of Tigray, first, and then Ethiopia as a whole. We know that Tigray needs access to the sea and the only way is through Eritrea. There are many Tigrayans in Eritrea. They don't want to be treated as foreigners there. They have the same history. We are worried about Eritrea because we are not sure that differences among the different groups can be kept under control (quoted in Fessahatzion 1999:229).

It might be then said that the issuance of the Eritrean currency could have shattered the illusion of the Tigrayan leadership. It is possible to assume that it spelled out to them that Eritrea was sliding away. It is not farfetched to argue then that the only way possible they saw to prevent the slide was to exert economic pressure on Eritrea. The first step of this economic pressure taken was to revoke the economic regime that was formally put in place in

1993. The FCA collapsed when the Ethiopian government unilaterally breached it and called for enforcement of new regime, which the Eritrean government resisted (Fessehatzion 1999:235-7). The Ethiopian government shifted all its foreign transactions from Assab to Djibouti. It also insisted on carrying out trade transactions between the two countries if it involved more than 2000 birr in foreign currency (Mengisteab and Yohannes 2005:253-4).

To sum up, from the foregoing discussion it may be possible to conclude that the Eritrea-Tigray relation is governed by the Tigrayan need to have Eritrea in the bandwagon of whatever form of political existence the former chooses to have. As a minority, it needs Eritrea if it is going to control Ethiopia. As independent state also it is difficult, if not unthinkable, to survive without Eritrea. This two-forked strategy dictates Tigrayan position on Eritrea. For Ethiopia at large, particularly, the Amhara elite, the loss of Eritrea is a great dent on their self-image and prestige, although it is currently explained in terms of the crucial impact it might have in the overall economic development of Ethiopia.

Ethiopian Elites on Eritrean Superiority Complex

Earlier I discussed the prejudiced Eritrean perception of Tigrayans. In this section I will discuss the other face of the coin of the prejudiced perception of Eritreans, notably the Tigrayan/Ethiopian one. The Ethiopian prejudiced views of Eritreans derive from their perception of the so-called Eritrean superiority complex. Discussing both prejudices will allow us to demonstrate the complexity of the problem and bring forward the latent or embedded causalities of the conflict. This would provide important insights in to why reaching for a resolution of the conflict has so far proved elusive.

Although, as we have seen, the Eritrean prejudices and stereotypes are of benign nature, the Ethiopian elite, particularly, following the outbreak of the second war has taken it perhaps too seriously because maybe it serves certain political objectives. What is interesting is that several of the ethnic groups in Ethiopia reportedly have their own prejudices and superiority complexes against others. The Amharas are said to have superiority complex vis-a-vis the other ethnic groups in Ethiopia. Prejudices and stereotypes abound; they are directed against the Oromo, Tigrayans, Gurage, Somalis, etc. Nevertheless those scholars and politicians of Amhara origin never emphasise the superiority complex within their ethnic group as they do to that of the Eritreans. Recently the Tigrayan and Amhara elites have found a common cause to blast Eritrean chauvinism. Arguably this common cause emanates from temporary political expediency. While the Amhara elite want to annul Eritrean independence the

Tigrayans want Eritrean independence to advance the Greater Tigray project. The second war conveniently gave both groups an ample opportunity to tailor common platform (Mengisteab 1999; Fessahatzion 1999; Sorenson and Matsuoka 2001), but it might reasonably be argued that it is not really Eritrean chauvinism that concerns much these intellectuals but more importantly Eritrea's aggressive assertion of its sovereignty.

Only this would make sense as to why Eritreans were subjected to these unscrupulous attacks. The Eritreans were accused of being arrogant supremacists, racists, etc. (see e.g. Tadesse 1999: 74, 78; Abbay 1998, 2001; Zewde 1999; Eshete 1998). Tigrayan officials such as Ghebru Asrat, Sebhat Nega, Dr. Solomon Inquai accused Eritreans, during the war, of super race mentality. Echoing the 'supreme mentality' of Eritreans Sebhat Nega is quoted as saying:

> ...calling themselves the 'Jews of Africa' and the 'Black Israelis'. They say Tigrayans are inferior and that they are a super race... that is the cause of this conflict. They say they are super race and they believe it. Our enemy is this attitude of the Eritrean people.[10]

One of the Tigray intellectuals Dr. Solomon Inquai also wrote,

> Eritreans consider themselves more civilized or enlightened not only than the Ethiopians but also than the rest of Africans. They think that life under colonial rule makes for better people.[11]

One of the prominent Ethiopian scholars, Professor Bahru Zewde, in an interview with the *Reporter* was quoted as saying,

> Eritrean chauvinism appears to be associated with the fact that Eritreans were colonized by Italians. The existence of certain infrastructures, the use of Italian utensils and appliances, eating with knives and forks and eating pasta instead of 'injera', etc., might have inculcated in the Eritreans a false sense of modernity.[12]

These quotations highlight the feeling of strong invocations Eritrean independence arouses among Ethiopians. For many Ethiopians the second war might have provided a sense of an ample opportunity to crush Eritrean superiority complex (Mengisteab and Yohannes 2005:245). What is perilous with this concerted criticism of the so-called Eritrean chauvinism is its tendency to transcend the borderlines of perceptions. It may readily be transformed into advocacy of violence in order to reverse Eritrean identity and independence. A detailed study was carried out by Sorenson and Matsuoka (2001) about the systematic attack on Eritrean identity and 'mentality' in the cyberspace

following the outbreak of the second war by what the authors designated as Abyssinian fundamentalism. Among the several quotes and references they presented in their study one illustrative example could be cited,

> The war Ethiopia must wage is not really about breaking the back bone [sic] of the Eritrean army. The latter is a small but important part of the mission. What Ethiopia must break into fragments is the thought process which gives birth to Eritreanism. Ethiopia must destroy this foundation of evil. Peace will only come to Ethiopia if Ethiopia destructs the psychogenetic force which condemns the Eritrean to be a living robot so synchronized to think and act uniformly. Ethiopia must break the back bone [sic] of this trait. Ethiopia must see that the new born Eritrea grow in an atmosphere where African values are taught and nurtured. The young of Eritrea must be reconnected to the history that is truly theirs. It is only when people are made whole that peace and happiness reign (Sorenson and Matsuoka 2001:58).

Phrases like 'African values', 'history truly theirs', refer to Ethiopian values and history to which the Eritreans should return. Further, Sorenson and Matsuoka, cite throughout the work how Eritreans are depicted to 'ADORE their conquerors and DESPISE themselves' (Sorenson and Matsuoka 2001:57, emphasis in original), etc. The message is to liberate themselves from all these pathologies Eritreans should return to their Ethiopian roots.

The pervasive campaigns by Ethiopian intellectuals and politicians about Eritrean diversity, artificiality, fabricated identity; and social-psychology expressed in chauvinism, racism, despise, in particular following the second Eritrea-Ethiopia war; without turning inward that is looking into the Ethiopian societal setting and reality could be seen as indicative of the political entrepreneurship that endeavours to bring back Eritrea to its 'authentic' identity than being an indication of the so-called Eritrean chauvinism. Eritrea and Eritreans regardless of how strongly they express their right to be people, in spite of all the sufferings and sacrifices they paid to be recognised as so, and in spite of deservedly achieving their independence; they are still Ethiopians. Eritrean national consciousness is depicted as false consciousness.

> Hatred and arrogant national consciousness conspired not only against the proper assessment of the relation with Tigray or Ethiopian people, but also against the proper understanding of their own people. Misperceptions always lead to miscalculation... the same (Eritrean) arrogance also negatively affected the nature (behaviour) of the leadership which emerged aggressive out of one of the most ugly civil wars (inter-Eritrean) in the horn of Africa. It is also related to the rise and development of the EPLF as a military organisation. It has been said that as the major arm (lea-

der) of the Eritrean armed struggle, the EPLF had not flourished in its
democratic and progressive sense (Tadesse 1999:104-105).

These are some few examples I picked up to illustrate the so-called Eritrean
social-psychology as expressed by Ethiopians and the manner to deal with it.
The crucial question is that, is it really the Eritrean mentality that worries these
Ethiopian intellectuals and politicians? Most probably it is not what Eritreans
feel about Tigrayans or Ethiopians, and about themselves that worries these
people. Indeed, it has to do with Eritrea's struggle for a separate identity and
sovereignty. Sorenson and Matsuoka (2001:52) succinctly express it, 'Ethio-
pia experienced Eritrean independence as a threat to their historical and na-
tional identity'. Eritreans are ridiculed for basing their national identity on co-
lonial legacy. They are subjected to concerted and systematic belittling for
claiming a separate identity from that of Ethiopia in general and Tigray in
particular.

Eritrean organisations and particularly their leaders were the primary tar-
gets of Ethiopian and Ethiopianist scholars' rampant vilifications campaigns.
Throughout the liberation struggle period Eritrean fronts were derogatively de-
scribed by both the Emperor and its successor (the Military Junta-Dergue) as
Jebha and Shaebia bandits bent to sell Eritrea to the highest petrodollar bid-
der. The underlying rationale behind this vilification was that the organisations
and their leaders were perceived to be the sole proponents of secession, and
the ones denying Ethiopian roots of Eritreans. The people of Eritrea, they
claimed, have never denied their Ethiopian-ness and do not support secession
from Ethiopia (Wolde Giorgis 1989). Apparently all this was used to conceal
the real reason for the concerted campaigns, notably that Eritrean sovereignty
is seen as grave danger for the fame and glory of a more than three millen-
nium of uninterrupted history and existence. In this sense the squabble that
burst over a small village 'is actually about Eritrea's survival as a sovereign
state' (Fessahatzion 1999:237). Here, there is no doubt that the Eritrean
government bears huge responsibility not only of mishandling the border dis-
pute and the diplomatic relations but also in its imprudent dealings with EPRDF
Ethiopian government in the post-liberation period. Well aware of the Great
Ethiopia mythology and Greater Tigray ambition the EPLF government should
have taken all necessary precautionary measure not to provide reasons for
those opponents of the Eritrean independence to open another war to obliter-
ate the gains Eritrean achieved at an extremely high price, a scenario that
terrifies Eritreans most.

Ethiopians who ridicule and belittle Eritrean nationalism, nationhood and identity as artificial, fabricated and baseless are also, by implication, saying that nationalism, nationhood and identity in Africa is artificial, fabricated and baseless. Today's Eritrea as a product of European colonialism displays all the markers of post-colonial African states. If Eritreans would say that they are Ethiopians, and Eritrea is Ethiopia, then they would not be subjected to the systematic accusations of displaying the so-called prejudice, racist, super mentality or superiority complexity. Probably they would be embraced, loved and respected with their 'Italian utensils and appliances'. Invariably Eritreans have argued that what Ethiopians covet is not the Eritrean person, indeed, it was expressed by Emperor Haile Selassie some half a century ago when he said 'what we want from Eritrea is the land not the people'.

Here it is worth mentioning that it is the opponents of Eritrean independence that primarily dwell on these accusations and ridicule. As Lata (2003:371) notes, 'To the opponents of Eritrea's independence, this war is strictly an intra-state affair. Hence, for them the conflict would come to a conclusion only when Ethiopia's traditional borders are restored not in the contested locality of Badme but at Red Sea Coast'. It does not matter how many Eritrean lives are sacrificed along the way. To these Ethiopians, the independence of Eritrea invokes a feeling of a person whose hand was chopped off by accident and would not rest until grafting it back at any price (Sorenson and Matsuoka 2001:47).

Conclusion and Prospects

This paper set out to analyse the Eritrea-Ethiopia conflict. Based on the analysis, the logical inference one could reach is that the causalities of the conflict are to be sought far beyond the so obvious proximate factors, in other words we have to look for deeply embedded historical factors that underlie it.

The declared intention of the task was stated as searching for explanation and interpretation. Hence a number of assumptions thought to be root factors of the conflict were expounded in some detail. Such causal factors include identity, history, state formation, mythologies, claims and counter-claims of separate identities and concomitant sovereignty, and liberation era unresolved points of difference between the liberation movements. If these variables are to be taken as the causal factors, then, the conflict relates to the very independence of Eritrea. In addition, the paper highlights how the two levels of engagement: Eritrea-Tigray and Eritrea-Ethiopia complicate the relationship as well as the effort to find durable resolution to the conflict. The complications these two levels of relationship manifest are related to two competing

expectations. The Great Ethiopia mythology believes that separation of Eritrea was a great menace to the country's glory as well as an impediment to its development. The Greater Tigray ambition also associates Eritrean independence with the survival of Tigray whatever the form it may assume.

Eritrea, on the other hand, has been engaged forcefully not only in resisting both Great Ethiopia mythology and Greater Tigray ambition but was involved in its own process of deconstruction and reconstruction that has certainly invoked rage among Ethiopians. The reconstructed counter-claim of history, identity and statehood locked Eritrea into a collision course with both narratives of 'Greaters'. This irreconcilable perception of history, identity and statehood and concomitant practices (Ethiopian vs. Eritrean sides) underpins the contours of the continuity of the conflict.

One of the arguments Ethiopian nationalists and scholars try to advance, in relation to Eritrean identity and nationalism, is that Eritrea is ethnically so divided that it cannot have deep-rooted national identity and common feeling (cf. Tadesse 1999; Abbay 1998, 2001). Eritrea's separate identity and sovereign statehood is thus doubted. Eritreans, however, questioned the sincerity of the concern with the artificiality and survivability of Eritrea. Indeed, Eritreans argue that all current African states are artificial, including Ethiopia.

It could not be over-emphasised then that proper understanding of the recent conflict would require interrogating all the complexities. The most critical root factor may be the formation of Eritrea and its subsequent yearning for sovereignty, on the one hand, and Ethiopia's uncompromising and inherent urge to hold it within its hegemonic polity perimeters, on the other. The Tigray-Eritrean, and particularly the EPLF-TPLF, relationship during the liberation struggle may further have complicated the conflict. The twin objectives of the TPLF and particularly the creation of Greater Tigray ambition (Mengisteab 1999:92; Reid 2003:386; Lata 2003:373) stood at the centre of the complication. A minor border dispute which the Eritrean government managed appallingly seem to have provided Great Ethiopia mythology and Greater Tigray ambition, or, to use Sorenson and Matsuoka's terminology, Abyssinian fundamentalism, an opportunity to try and reverse Eritrean independence.

For the Tigrayans, though overtly they seem to accept independence of Eritrea, yet covertly they have tied Eritrean sovereignty with their twin objectives. The TPLF 'conveniently followed a dual strategy of seeking solutions both within and outside greater Ethiopia. This contradictory perspective seemed to be resolved in 1991 when the larger Ethiopian cake was fully controlled by the group' (Gudina 2003:118). Yet the domination of the larger Ethiopian cake presupposes the drawing in of Eritrea in that larger political space. If it is

to retain its dominance of the Ethiopian polity, the TPLF essentially needs to soothe Ethiopian objection of Eritrean independence. This soothing would mean holding on to Eritrea. The second option, the establishment of independent Tigrayan state also could only be sustained if it could ensure a close relation with Eritrea.

For the rest of Ethiopia, from practicality perspective, Eritrea means the imperative outlet to the sea. Many Ethiopians make a direction connection between possessing seaports and development and prosperity of their country. Therefore, there is a deep resentment of the fact that while a population of four million could control two ports, a nation of eighty million people will be deprive of one. Moreover, they are convinced that they have historical, cultural, legal and international rights on the ports. As long as this legitimate right is not addressed then there will not be peace and security between the two neighbours, and the stalemate will continue.

Another perplexing dimension of the conflict is the role played by the international community. Although this was not the focus of the paper it would be of general interest to say few words about it. The UN, OAU (AU), EU and USA were guarantors of the final and binding Algiers Agreement that ended the second war between Eritrea and Ethiopia in December 2000. Nonetheless they were unable to enforce the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission verdict of April 2002. Instead of putting pressure on Ethiopia to accept an international court ruling, the United Nations Security Council delivered sanctions on Eritrea on 23 December 2009, further adding complication to what was already an intractable problem. The sanction may be tempting for Ethiopia to exploit and take military actions against Eritrea. If that temptation is put into action not only we will have a chaotic Eritrea in our hand but also it will have a far-reaching implication for Ethiopia and the region as a whole.

The international community was already on record for failing to stop the war. The double failure imperatively emanates, firstly, from lack of understanding of the complex factors underlying the conflict; secondly, from an act of complacency that allowed one party to get away with the rejection of the Permanent Court of Arbitration's legal verdict. The policy of complacency is dictated by superpower strategic interest in the region, particularly by the war on terrorism. The international community therefore needs to devise fair, just and even-handed policy that engages not only two nations but also all actors in the region. In other words a holistic regional approach is needed.

By way of conclusion I would like to propose some suggestions that may move the situation forward.

- Implement immediately and unconditionally the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) verdict. This will ensure Eritrea's security and sovereignty.

- Following the implementation of EEBC verdict the two countries should engage in dialogue with the aim of entering into new agreement similar to that of the friendship and cooperation agreement they signed in 1993. This time all pending issues of difference should be discussed in a transparent way and be properly resolved. Above all Ethiopia's need of outlet to the sea through Eritrean ports should be addressed in a manner that satisfies both countries.

- Enhance regional integration. Probably reinvigorate the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) with clearly and concretely defined objectives of integration with a defined timeframe. This may assuage the mutual suspicions and fears that may exist in bilateral relationship.

- Stop interfering in the internal affairs of the other. Supporting opposition groups based on the principle of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend' often leads to 'proxy wars' and is plunging the whole region into turmoil.

- Strengthen historical, traditional and institutional ties among communities. Along the whole borderline there are communities divided by international political boundaries that may serve as a bridge for cooperation, stability and peaceful coexistence

Notes

1. Richard Reid (2003:274) notes, "the terms in which much of the world's media framed its thoughts on the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia were markedly one-dimensional… These were two bald men fighting over a comb; two poverty-stricken African nations (the 'hostile tribes' concept was lurking just below the surface) fighting for pride at the expense of the material dignity of their populations; two ignorant governments engaging in brutal and bloody 'First World War tactics' for pieces of insignificant land".

2. The Friendship and Cooperation Agreement (FCA) between the Ethiopian and Eritrean government's was signed after the Eritrean referendum that declared the de jure independence of Eritrea in July 1993. The FCA consists of five points and these are: "1. Preservation of the free flow of goods and services, capital and people; 2. Ethiopia's continued free access to Eritrea's sea ports paying for port services in its own currency, the *bir*; 3. Cooperation in monetary policy and continued use of the *bir* by both countries until Eritrea issued its own currency; 4. Harmonization of customs policies and; 5. Cooperation and consultation in foreign policy" (Mengisteab and Yohannes 2004:229-30).

3. This Ethiopian perception is too familiar and the literature has dealt with it extensively so, I don't see any need to replicate it here in detail. It would be enough to

mention works by such scholars as Richard Pankhurst (1964), Erlich Haggai (1982), Donald Levine (1974), Bahru Zewde (1991), Sven Rubenson (1976).

4.   Scholars like Basil Davidson, Lionel Cliffe, Richard Greenfield, David Pool, Dan Connell are some of the friends of Eritrea who have advocated for the rights of the Eritrean people to exist as a sovereign people. On the Ethiopian side there are scholars like Sven Rubenson, Harod Marcus, Donald Levine, Haggai Erlich, Richard Punkhurst, Paul Henz to mention but few who have adopted the position of the Great Ethiopian Tradition mythology.

5.   By the end of the 1930s the colonial army constituted the largest employment opportunity in the territory that Eritrean soldiers in the colonial army consisted of about 70 000 which was more than 40 per cent of the active labour force (see Bereketeab 2000:128).

6.   The word *agame* is a name of a district in Tigray. In its popular connotation in Eritrea, however, is used to denigrate people from Tigray. It is used in its pejorative and derogatory meaning. Within the Eritrean demographic structure and social cleavage also it assumes further additional connotation. When used by lowland Eritreans it is to show that one is a Tigrinya speaker connoting primordial (language, religious and cultural) affiliation with the Tigrayans.

7.   The Tigray-Tigrigni compound phrase denoting unity of the people of Tigray and Tigrinya speaking Eritreans is associated with the Liberal Progressive Party (LPP) which in its advocacy of Eritrean independence in the 1940s also campaigned for the joining of Tigray in the emergent independent Eritrea. The LPP, contrary to the belief of many Tigrayan intellectuals, however, derived from the perception of sovereign Eritrean identity and craved to annex Tigray (see LPP Memorandum to "Four Power Commission of Investigation for the Former Italian Colonies Report on Eritrea", FO 371-69365, Appendix 101).

8.   The historian Tekeste Negash, in article 'Eritrea and Ethiopia: From Cooperation to Competition', 2 May 1998, writes 'How could the Eritrean leaders talk of political and economic integration without attempting to explain why they had in the first place waged a war of independence which brought so much suffering to millions of Ethiopians? Wasn't the idea of keeping Eritrea within Ethiopia, after all, correct when the Eritreans themselves were pleading for economic and eventually political integration…To begin with, Eritrean leaders could (and ought to) take the initiative and commemorate all the innocent soldiers who were killed in the war. The EPLF is equally to blame for the death of hundreds of thousands of Ethiopian soldiers as much as the regime of Menghistu Haile Mariam'. This is tantamount to asking the EPLF to apologise to the people of Ethiopia for wagging a war of independence.

9.   When the war broke out in 1998 many Eritrean Moslems expressed their relief that they felt it was now that they could say Eritrea became independent. The writer was told by Moslem acquaintance of his that in Stockholm many Moslem lowlanders became cheerful when they heard that war has begun between Eritrea and Ethiopia. It is also widely believed that the Ethiopian populace expressed similar feelings albeit for a different reason.

10. Ghidewon Abay-Asmerom, 1999. Super Race Mentality? Who is guilty of it?. http://www.primenet.com/~ephrem/ghidewona.html

11. Ibid.Yohannes, O., 1991, *Eritrea, A Pawn in World Politics*, Gainsesville: University of Florida Press.

12. Professor Bahru Zewde 'A Historical Perspective of the Ethio-Eritrean Border Conflict'. http://Addis-Tribune.EthiopiaOnline...ves/1999/01/01-01-99/P-Bahru.htm

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