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C U L T U R A E S O C I E T À

Encouraging Prospects for
Good Relations between
Eritrea and Ethiopia

Italy's Residual Legacy in the
Horn of Africa as a Factor of
Cooperation

La musica moderna in Etiopia e la
sua diffusione a livello globale

n. 92-93 | Corno d'Africa: prospettive e relazioni



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Corno d’Africa: prospettive e relazioni



Encouraging Prospects for Good Relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia

How do we read the new phase of Eritrea-Ethiopia relations and what are the prospects for sustainable peace between the two countries? To answer this question, we must consider the constant and changing features of Eritrean-Ethiopian relations from the late 1950s until the present day.¹

by Tekeste Negash

«From now onwards, anyone who says that the Eritreans and Ethiopians are two people has not understood the truth. Eritreans and Ethiopians are one people in two countries». This is a free translation of the statement in Tigrinya of Isaias Afewerki, president of Eritrea, during his first visit to Ethiopia on the 14th July 2018.² The president further stated that he mandated Dr. Abiy Ahmed, the prime minister of Ethiopia, to continue the work of uniting the two countries. Asked about his best memories/achievements in life, president Isaias stated that signing peace with Ethiopia was one of them.

Can we take the above statements seriously, coming as they do from a person who fought against Ethiopia for over fifty years, or are we to dismiss them as the utterances of a senile leader soon to exit the political scene? As I shall attempt to explain in this paper, I argue that the views of president Isaias on Eritrean/Ethiopian relations need to be taken seriously.

I strongly believe that he has significant support inside Eritrea; the overwhelming joy that Eritreans showed at the Ethiopian prime minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed's first visit to Asmara in early July 2018 can certainly be read as a positive sign.

The warm reception of president Isaias in Ethiopia and the positive treatment of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia could also be taken as important factors in the construction of peace.

Yet the question remains: How do we read the new phase of Eritrea-Ethiopia relations and what are the prospects for a sustainable peace between the two countries? My view, which is also the main premise of this paper, is the following: there are now sufficient conditions for a new (reconfigured) Eritrean-Ethiopian border that reflect the wishes/desires of the population of both countries and their leaders. The most important condition is, of course, the statement of president Isaias, but how did this condition come about? How do we

explain this new narrative? I think it is when we try to grasp the constant and changing features of Eritrean-Ethiopian relations from the late 1950s onwards that we can appreciate the implications of president Isaias's statement.³

A great deal has been written on the role of the United Arab Emirates in facilitating the peace treaty through generous financial aid. The then Ethiopian foreign minister, Dr. Gebeyehu Werkneh, has not only acknowledged but also warmly thanked the United Arab Emirates for its role in sealing the peace treaty between Ethiopia and Eritrea. But I believe peace in one form or another would have come due to the radical political changes that took place on the wake of the ascension to power of Dr. Abiy Ahmed as prime minister in early April 2018.

The Ethiopian government that up to the end of March 2018 was dominated by the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) - pejoratively called Weyane - was replaced by the Oromo peoples' Democratic Organization (OPDO), led by Dr. Abiy Ahmed (half-Oromo and half-Amhara). In a matter of few days, the TPLF lost its dominant position and was literally pushed back to Tigray province, where it continues to exercise unchallenged hegemonic power.

Between 1991 and 1997, the Ethiopian political scene was dominated by four major discourses.

The first was the wisdom, or mistake, in reconfiguring the country along ethnic borders and hence the pre-eminence of identity politics.

The second discourse was the privileged position given to Eritrea and Eritreans. Many people in Addis Ababa believed that Eritrea and its inhabitants were rewarded for breaking away from Ethiopia. Ethiopia was being invaded by an Eritrean diaspora and by Eritrean enterprises managed by the powerful Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). At the end of 1995 Isaias Afewerki described relations between the two countries as moving towards complete union. However, his vision

was certainly not reflected on the ground, where the role of Eritrea and Eritreans in the Ethiopian political scene was so hotly and widely debated that the Ethiopian government could no longer ignore it. A specific issue was the question of the citizenship of Eritreans. Many Ethiopians asked their government to deal with the question - an issue that the TPLF (Tigray) dominated government was also keen to settle but in its own good time.

The third discourse was the reorganization of the Ethiopian political economy in favour of the TPLF (Tigray) as the dominant member of the coalition of organizations that made up the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The government, dominated as it was by the TPLF (Tigray), did indeed encourage donors to pay attention to Tigray (a very poor, and marginalized province). It is, however, important to mention that in those dramatic years, that is between 1991 and 1997, rumours, facts, and politics were all ingredients widely circulated and difficult to disentangle from one another.

The fourth discourse was the power struggle between Eritrean president Isaias Afewerki and Ethiopian prime minister Meles Zenawi from Tigray (1991-2012), on the role of Eritrea and Eritreans in the Ethiopian economic sphere. Independent Eritrea was better equipped to play a big share in the Ethiopian economy compared to the newly established autonomous region of Tigray. It has to be recalled that nearly 40 percent of all industrial and manufacturing activities of Ethiopia were located in Eritrea.⁴ The perception of Eritrea and Eritreans playing a very active role in or even dominating the Ethiopian economy was out in the open in Addis Ababa in the early 1990s.

At the same time, the Ethiopian government led by Meles Zenawi initiated a series of economic development programs to strengthen the position of Tigray in the Ethiopian economy. The TPLF (Tigray)-dominated government began to build similar factories (such as for the manufacture of leather goods, drugs, and textiles) as those in Eritrea. The Eritrean government reacted sharply to what it called the duplication of manufacturing companies and the creation of unnecessary competition between Eritrea and Tigray.

The TPLF fought to lift Tigray from its position as a neglected and poor on the periphery of Ethiopia. I think we can safely argue that the Eritrean government had either little sympathy for or very little knowledge of the objectives of the TPLF (Tigray) and its long war against the Ethiopian regime.

From the middle of 1997, the Eritrean government felt it had been pushed out from the Ethiopian economic sphere by the TPLF (Tigray)-dominated government. The refusal of the Ethiopian government to allow the *nakfa* - the new Eritrean currency - parity with the *birr* (Ethiopian currency) was further interpreted as a hostile act. In early 1998, Isaias gave a long interview where he summed up his views on what went wrong in Eritrean-Ethiopian relations. Isaias Afewerki concluded that the deadlock should not continue indefinitely, that the Eritrean

and Ethiopian people are bound to live together and that «we cannot change geographical and historical links that bind the peoples of the two countries». Finally, Isaias said that Eritrea, while respecting Ethiopia's policies, would continue to look for better alternatives.⁵ The interview with president Isaias was published in April 1998. It reflected that relations between the two countries had been deteriorating for some time.

Although it was Eritrea, by invading a disputed territory, that initiated the 1998-2000 war, both countries soon agreed that the war had very little to do with border issues. The Eritrean government stated repeatedly that it would not reach an agreement so long as the TPLF (Tigray) remained the dominant organization in Ethiopia. And the Ethiopian government pursued the policy of isolating Eritrea in the hope that its economy would implode from the inside; the Ethiopian government believed that it was only a question of time. The no war, no peace phase could only come to an end under two circumstances. The first was the fall of the Eritrean regime led by Isaias Afewerki, and the second was the fall of the TPLF (Tigray) from its commanding heights in Ethiopian politics.

The rise of Dr. Abiy Ahmed in early April 2018 provided the proof of what many people had suspected over the last twenty-seven years: that the Ethiopian government was indeed

dominated by the TPLF (with its ethnic base in Tigray). The no war, no peace stalemate was resolved, and leaders of both countries affirmed and reaffirmed that the Eritreans and Ethiopians were one people. The border (as a cause of conflict) between Eritrea and Ethiopia dissipated into thin air. In front

of Isaias Afewerki, the newly elected Ethiopian prime minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed told his people that the border was destroyed (made redundant), and a new bridge of love was constructed over it.

In an interview with Eri.TV on the 7th February 2020, president Isaias Afewerki said:

The war against us was a consequence of the 1995 constitution. There was no border issue at the time of the war; we never knew the border since those before us had already demarcated it. The war was not between Eritrea and Ethiopia; it was between TPLF [Tigray] and Eritrea.

How did we come to such radical views about the relations between the two countries? I am fully aware that writing the history of Eritrea from the 1950s until the present within the parameters of this format is a project that opens itself, quite rightly, to criticism from all quarters. It is nonetheless worth the effort because the statement by Isaias Afewerki on the unity of the two people cannot be understood without a good grasp of what has gone on in Eritrea since and after it became an Italian colony. Whether Isaias survives long enough to see the formation of a political union of some sort between Eritrea and Ethiopia is of no great significance. What is important, according to my reading of the history of

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My view, which is also the main premise of this paper, is the following: there are now sufficient conditions for a new (reconfigured) Eritrean-Ethiopian border that reflect the wishes/desires of the population of both countries and their leaders.

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A boy looks over from a clifftop in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia.
Credits: James Jeffrey/IRIN.

the region, is that the material conditions and the series of changes that took place in Eritrea since its “forced” incorporation into the Ethiopian Empire in the early 1950s will continue to create favourable conditions for closer relations between the two countries.

Eritrea as the Industrial Centre of the Ethiopian Empire, and Addis Ababa Spoke Tigrinya by Night, 1952-74

Probably one of the lasting impacts of both Italian and British colonialism is the expectation and partial realisation of a European/Italian lifestyle. Close contact between the Italian and Eritrean communities was enhanced by two factors. The first was the huge number of Italians in a very small geographical location, namely the Eritrean highlands, a region of about twenty thousand square kilometres. Second was the need of the Italian population for various services, such as domestics at home and at the workplace. We also need to recall that the Eritreans were given political and economic privileges as a reward for their contribution to the occupation and pacification of Ethiopia between 1935 and 1941. The demise of Italian colonialism further contributed to the emergence of many Eritreans in sectors of the economy such as trucking, machine maintenance, and general services.

Modern education was another sector where the Eritreans had a comparative advantage in relation to other Ethiopians. Italy destroyed the two modern schools established by Emperor Menelik (1908) and Emperor Haile Selassie (1925) and killed as many as 50 percent of the approximately two thousand students who graduated from them. The educational

landscape in Eritrea was slightly better. After a year of closure (1935-36), schools reopened, and an average of two thousand students continued their studies, the most ambitious of them completing a programme equivalent to four years of elementary school.⁶ There were more children in Eritrean schools than in the entire Ethiopian empire in 1941, largely because Eritrea was peacefully (in colonial parlance) ruled for more than forty years.

Eritrea did not become an independent state as the Italian community had wished; and it was not partitioned into two (between the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and Ethiopia) as the Muslim League of western Eritrea had desired. It is indeed important to remember that Ethiopia did not claim the whole of Eritrea. The maximum claim of Ethiopia was the Eritrean highlands, including access to the sea, and the minimum claim was just access to the sea.⁷ By a twist of history, Ethiopia ended up acquiring the whole of Eritrea.

Not only did the emperor rehabilitate fully the Eritrean colonial soldiers, he also tried to keep as many Italians as possible in the country on the belief that they would help him develop his country. By the beginning of 1950, the Eritrean population in all parts of Ethiopia might have been between 100,000 and 120,000. More than 2,000 Eritreans were gainfully employed in Ethiopian public service, and the most prominent staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were from Eritrea.⁸ It is important to put the Eritrean population in Ethiopia in 1950 in relation to the population of Eritrea, which in 1950 was about 700,000.⁹ Nearly 20 percent of the Eritrean population lived and worked in Ethiopia in 1950.

With the coming of the federation, Eritreans, now as full citizens of the Ethiopian Empire, moved in even bigger numbers to Ethiopia. They had two main advantages: first, they had gained skills owing to their close contact with the Italians; and second, they had greater access to modern education. Let us look in general terms at the advantage Eritrean youth had in relation to the rest of the population.

In 1959-60 the enrolment landscape looked as follows:

Enrolment in government schools in the Ethiopian empire: 181,163; in Eritrea: 32,387.

Enrolment in mission schools in the Ethiopian empire 20,497; in Eritrea: 6,612.

Enrolment in private schools in the Ethiopian empire: 14,790; in Eritrea: 9,110.¹⁰

In 1959-60 there were 581 government elementary schools, out of which 154 were in Eritrea. In the empire, including Addis Ababa, there were 28 secondary schools out of which 3 were in Eritrea. In the provinces, there were 14 secondary schools in total. The total number of students stood at 224,934, out of which 48,111 were from Eritrea.

Nearly 30 percent of all the students in the empire were Eritreans.¹¹ The largest non-Amhara group at the newly established Addis Ababa University (AAU) were Eritreans; between 1963 and 1968, nearly 17 percent of those who passed the Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate Examination (ESLCE) were Eritreans.

The Ethiopian educational landscape was no doubt dominated by Eritrea and its inhabitants. The number given above does not include the children of Eritrean families that resided in all the provinces of the empire. It would not be an exaggeration to state that up to 1960, one out of three students of the empire was Eritrean. Eritrea, it has to be kept in mind, was a tiny province with a population of slightly over 700,000, whereas Ethiopia in 1960 might have had a population between 18 and 22 million. The Eritrean population, which constituted less than 5 percent of the Ethiopian population, had so much comparative advantage due to its colonial experience.

The presence of the Eritreans in high political positions was also considerable, once again in view of the small demographic size of the region, as was documented by Christopher Clapham in the 1960s. Between 1941 and 1966, out of the 138 individuals holding high office in the central government, 85 were from Shoa, 7 from Tigray, 19 from Eritrea, and 6 from Wällega. In 1966, out of the 68 high officials in the empire, 9 were from Eritrea, 5 were from Wällega, and 2 from Tigray (about 15 percent of all officials were from Eritrea). It has to be remembered that these were high officials (such as ministers). Eritreans were heavily represented in the intermediate levels of the imperial bureaucracy.¹² In the context above, one can certainly argue that Eritrea was decolonised and its citizens were represented in the Ethiopian economic, social, and po-

litical spheres much more than what their demography would indicate. The anecdote that Addis Ababa spoke Tigrinya by night had, according to me, more substance in the sense that many Eritreans with good-paying jobs could afford the expenses of going out in the evenings.

The Fall of Haile Selassie and the Steady Decline of Eritrea and Eritreans in Ethiopian Affairs, 1974-1991

Not all Eritreans benefitted from being united to Ethiopia. The Christian Eritreans (or commonly known as the highlanders) were the great beneficiaries. The Muslims of western Eritrea were not easily absorbed into the Ethiopian economy. Western Eritrea was joined to Ethiopia by the decision of the United Nations in 1950. Both the Unionist Party in Eritrea that fought for reunion with Ethiopia, and the Ethiopian government, had clearly stated that the inhabitants of western Eritrea were free to either join Sudan or declare their independence. And it was exactly in the western parts of Eritrea and by those Eritreans who voted to be independent (both from Ethiopia and Sudan) that the first armed resistance against Ethiopian administration started in the autumn of 1961.

Eritreans were used to a lifestyle based on an economy dominated by the presence of the US military base at Kagnaw Station in Asmara (1953-72) and the Italian community. The five thousand soldier-strong American military station kept the urban economy going. The approximately ten thousand-strong Italian community managed to give a certain amount of urban flavour to the city of Asmara and also gave employment

to several thousand Eritreans. Contact between American soldiers and Eritrean youth (mainly in drinking places), as well as contact between the Italian community and the Eritreans of Asmara transformed the youth of Asmara (the Asmarinos) to be the most sophisticated citizens of the Ethiopian Empire. By the end of 1974, the American military base was closed, and most of the Italian community, scared by the socialist rhetoric of the military regime that replaced the late emperor Haile Selassie (known as the Derg), left Eritrea for good.

We can date the beginning of the decline and eventual collapse of the Eritrean economy to two major factors, namely, the closure of Kagnaw Station (the American military base) in 1973 and the mass exodus of the Italian community in 1975. Thus from 1975 until 1991, the comparative advantage that Eritrea had up to 1974 was steadily erased, and by 1990 Eritrea lost virtually all its advantages.

Already by 1980, Eritrea had lost a great deal. Certainly, up to 100,000 of its youth were either in the Eritrean liberation movements or had left Eritrea. The school system was completely disrupted. From 1980 to 1989, the Ethiopian state turned Eritrea, where more than 150,000 Ethiopian soldiers were stationed, into the main theatre of war. At least six major offensives to push and defeat the EPLF (Eritrean People's

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Modern education was another sector where the Eritreans had a comparative advantage in relation to other Ethiopians. Italy destroyed the two modern schools established by Emperor Menelik (1908) and Emperor Haile Selassie (1925) and killed as many as 50 percent of the approximately two thousand students who graduated from them. The educational landscape in Eritrea was slightly better.

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Liberation Front) were recorded, each bringing massive destruction of human life and material resources. The Ethiopian state was at war not only against the Eritrean liberation fronts but also indirectly against the Eritrean people, as it failed to involve them in a meaningful way.¹³ Determined to solve the Eritrean conflict by arms, as it did in Somalia, the Ethiopian state turned Eritrea into a militarized zone.

The Eritrean people found themselves squeezed between two highly authoritarian regimes. The Eritrean liberation fronts forced people to support them (at the risk of being considered enemies), and the Ethiopian state was all too ready to punish and kill anyone suspected of aiding or supporting the Eritrean rebels. Those harassed by the Ethiopian state left Eritrea, and many were encouraged/forced by the Eritrean liberation fronts to join the fronts, leaving their homes and families behind. Between 1980 and 1991, Eritrea was emptied both of its people and its resources.

The thirty years war of liberation (1961-1991) left a legacy of the invincibility of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. The EPLF, admittedly with the crucial support of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), had defeated the Ethiopian army successively, first at Nakfa in 1982, then at Af Abet in 1988, and later in early February 1990 when the EPLF won its second and most important victory by seizing the city and port of Massawa. Eritrea became independent in 1991 (*de facto*) and juridically in 1993. The conference held in Asmara in July 1991 (only a couple of months after liberation) revealed a very serious gap of perception as to the potentials of Eritrea. While Isaias

described the damage of the thirty years of war on the Eritrean economic and social fabric, Eritrean diaspora scholars painted a future for Eritrea that had no correspondence with the reality on the ground. How could a country whose economy has, according to its leader, been completely destroyed and whose manpower potential was ravaged by neglect, drought, and natural calamities be described at the same time as a country that had all the potential to emerge as a hub like Singapore? Eritrea has been served badly by its intellectuals.¹⁴

Ethiopia and Eritrea: Unequal Partners, 1991-2018

Between 1974 and 2018 both Eritrea and Ethiopia experienced notable changes in their demographic composition. The inhabitants of western Eritrea (mostly Muslim) were successively pushed or driven out of their villages and settlements. This was largely due to the fact that most of the war between the Ethiopian army and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front took place in the western parts of the country. There was also another factor; the EPLF has been either unwilling or incapable of encouraging the return of the approximately half a million Eritreans from the Western region. Either by design or by default, the Tigrinya speakers of Eritrea have repopulated most of the regions previously inhabited by the Muslim communities of western Eritrea.

In a long interview, Gunther Schröder pointed out that more

than 30 percent of the population in the northern Red Sea region and more than 20 percent in the Afar region have fled to Sudan and Ethiopia, respectively. The government replaced the loss by settling people from the Tigrinya-speaking regions of the highlands. Schröder mentioned the case of Gash and Barca - a region that has experienced more than 30 percent growth. The new migrants are peasants from the Tigrinya-speaking regions of the country. Tigrinya-speaking Eritreans are moving into the previously Muslim/non-Tigrinya regions, while the indigenous inhabitants (Schröder's term), mostly Muslims, are moving out to Sudan and Ethiopia. The use of Arabic as a *lingua franca* has been rejected by the Eritrean government since 1993. Moreover, Schröder estimated the population of Eritrea to be about 3.2 million at the end of 2019.¹⁵

There is also another indicator of the demographic decline of Eritrea, namely school enrolment. It is said that Eritrea is composed of nine different ethnic groups. This might be true, but the lion's share of the resources is under the control of the Tigrinya ethnic group. The Tigrinya districts had in 2015-16 a total enrolment of slightly more than 51,000 in the secondary school system, whereas the remaining eight ethnic communities had a combined total of less than 25,000 enrolled students.

Nearly 80 percent of all secondary school students are from the highlands - that is from the Tigrinya-speaking areas of the country.¹⁶

Although we can strongly argue that Eritrea is under the firm grip of the Tigrinya-speaking group at the expense of the remaining eight non-Tigrinya ethnic commu-

nities, we also notice that the country has experienced considerable demographic decline, especially since 2001.

Encouraging Prospects for New Relations

Already on the eve of the independence of Eritrea in 1993, the leaders of both countries floated the idea of confederation. Attempts were made to establish institutional infrastructures to enhance economic and eventually political integration. At the bottom of this discourse, there was, according to me, a strong current of irredentism among the population of both countries, but especially among Ethiopians. In broad terms, we can describe the irredentist undercurrents as follows: many Eritreans, especially among the Tigrinya, believed that they were part of the Ethiopian nation; they fought for it, and they died for it as well.¹⁷ Whereas the majority of Ethiopians considered Eritrea as part of Ethiopia once under a brief European colonial rule; and the return of Eritrea to Ethiopia (that is the irredentist position) was logical and just a question of time.

The now famous statement of president Isaias on the 14th July 2018 can certainly be read as a confirmation of an irredentist view. Many Ethiopians did not and still do not accept the reasons why Eritrea opted to fight for so long to break away from Ethiopia. The belief that Eritreans are as good as any other Ethiopians and that there are still solid links that bind

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We can date the beginning of the decline and eventual collapse of the Eritrean economy to two major factors, namely, the closure of Kagnew Station (the American military base) in 1973 and the mass exodus of the Italian community in 1975.
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Eritrean refugees are still arriving in Ethiopia.
Credits Sara Creta/TNH.

the two peoples is very strong. This irredentist stand is highly criticized by Eritrean nationalist scholars who accuse Ethiopia either of lingering hegemonic ambitions or blatant refusal to accept the fact of Eritrean independence. However, it is not the Ethiopian government that refused to accept the independence of Eritrea; it is rather the people of Ethiopia.¹⁸

How should Ethiopia treat Eritrea, its people, and its resources? This is a huge subject, the ramifications of which can only be sketched at this stage of our knowledge. With great trepidation, I shall outline my views, firmly based, I hope, on the unfolding of the history of the region since the 1950s and fully aware that both Eritrea and Ethiopia are in the midst of great social and political upheaval with an unpredictable future.

The cornerstone of Ethiopian policy on Eritrea ought to be the eventual union of the Eritrean and Ethiopian people without infringing on any instruments of international law. Eritrea is not a foreign country as far as the majority of Ethiopians are concerned. And I think one can also say that Ethiopia is not a foreign country for the majority of the Eritrean people. The late emperor Haile Selassie is accused (though I have not been able to ascertain the truth of the allegation) of being interested in the territory of Eritrea and not its people.

The opening of the border aroused the deep feelings of unity that lay buried for so long. Irredentist sentiments (in both countries) appear to be deep and hence cannot be easily derailed by statements (such as that alleged to Emperor Haile Selassie) or even by decisions of leaders such as Emperor Menelik and his complicity with Italy in the making of Eritrea.¹⁹

The greatest problem for Eritrean diaspora communities (of course not all of them) is the widespread belief in Ethiopia that the greater part of Eritrea was part and parcel of Ethiopian political history. Eritreans cannot accuse Ethiopians of holding the belief that the Eritreans are their brothers. Some Eritreans (most of them in the diaspora) might have succeeded in breaking clean from any connections with Ethiopia and its culture by denying any value to the cultural and political links that still exist between the peoples of the region. But many Eritreans still cherish the cultural, historical, and geographical links they have with the rest of Ethiopia and its people. Even Bereket Habte Selassie, after forty years of denial, eventually came to talk in 2017 about intangible things that unite Eritrea and Ethiopia, and he proposed a special formula (confederation) as a good solution. However, of far more importance was the reaction of the Eritrean people on the occasion of the opening of the Eritrean-Ethiopian border on the 11th September 2018; it was a resounding demonstration of the links that had endured a long separation.

Given the skewed balance of forces, Ethiopia would be tempted to think primarily in terms of exercising hegemonic power such as a visible presence in the Red Sea and pursuing policies that put the interests of the state (security and big business)

at the expense of the interests of ordinary people. It would be a great tragedy if that were to be the main pillar of Ethiopian policy. It is only when Ethiopia succeeds to gain the confidence of the Eritrean and Tigrayan people that it can evolve a Red Sea policy that is commensurate with its size and need. The objective of unhindered access to the Red Sea cannot be achieved unless it is manifestly clear that it is reflective of the interests of the majority of the people straddling the Red Sea coast.

A second challenge is reviving the Eritrean economy from its current state of collapse. The Eritrean economy is in shambles, and there is no private sector worth the name. The Eritrean economy is that of a war economy where every resource is under the control of the state. The Eritrean state defined the 1998-2018 period as a period when the country was besieged not only by Ethiopia but also by powers such as the United States. Major economic activities are carried out by state-controlled enterprises. Foreign investment is allowed only in collaboration with either the state or enterprises owned by the state.

The economic mess that the system of president Isaias has brought about is indeed a challenge for Ethiopia. Unless Ethiopia takes this aspect of the Eritrean economy into serious

consideration, the temptation for Ethiopian business and capital to claim more space would be irresistible.²⁰ Such a hegemonic approach to Eritrean political economy could in turn be viewed, especially by Eritreans in the diaspora, as a second Ethiopian colonization of their country.

Yet the future trajectory of relations between the two countries rests heavily on Ethiopian shoulders.

Whether Eritrea succeeds to establish a confederal relation with Ethiopia depends on the political climate in Addis Ababa. At the moment (September 2020), the situation in Ethiopia can be described as follows: there is a weak central government surrounded by quite strong regional/ethnic states. Some of the regions, Tigray and Oromia, for example, are so strong that they have the power to hold the federal government at bay. A strong federal government is a precondition for managing Eritrea-Ethiopia relations towards a direction of greater integration at all levels. This is all the more true since any such move would be challenged by the Eritreans in the diaspora - for many of whom the continued crises in Eritrea is a condition for seeking asylum in Europe and North America. Is Ethiopia up to the challenges sketched above? This is obviously a very difficult question to answer for the simple reason that it is impossible to know for certain the future policy orientations of the Ethiopian government of the day. Ethiopia is in the middle of profound social and political upheaval, where the policies of the TPLF led government (1991-2018) are rejected and new ones are in the process of evolving. Nevertheless, few words can be said on the capacity of the current prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, and what he might be able to achieve if he were to remain in power for another ten

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Eritrean diaspora scholars painted a future for Eritrea that had no correspondence with the reality on the ground. How could a country whose economy has, according to its leader, been completely destroyed and whose manpower potential was ravaged by neglect, drought, and natural calamities be described at the same time as a country that had all the potential to emerge as a hub like Singapore?

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years or long enough, as his predecessors.²¹ In sharp contrast to former Ethiopian rulers such as Mengistu Hailemariam (1974-1991) and Meles Zenawi (1991-2012), Dr. Abiy Ahmed has a much deeper knowledge of the people of Tigray and by extension of the Tigrinya population in Eritrea.

Only a few days after coming to power, Abiy Ahmed outlined the political orientation he would follow in northern Ethiopia and by extension Eritrea. As far as Tigray is concerned, Abiy stated that what the people aspire to is to live peacefully with the rest of the Ethiopian people as they did before, that is during the imperial period.²² The imperial system is gone for good, and neither the repeated statement by the people of Tigray to live their lives as they did before nor the prime minister's endorsement of such aspirations imply a return to the past. But what is implied is quite clear. It is the opening of Ethiopia to all its citizens and the recognition of the importance of citizenship over other rights such as identity rights. Abiy Ahmed stands a good chance of getting the support of the people of Tigray if he can ensure their free movement throughout the country. In the meantime, I am greatly troubled by the highly destructive discourse on the breakup of Tigray that is currently gaining ground fanned by social media.²³

In the case of Eritrea, the recognition of irredentist undercurrents in both countries can, I believe, be used as a building block to construct sustainable policies of integrating Eritrea. I believe that prime minister Abiy Ahmed has the knowledge to deal with the challenges sketched above. I hope that other looming issues of governance will not fully absorb his attention and force him to leave Eritrea and its future to the winds of fortuitous events.

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NOTES

- 1 - This is a condensed version of a longer article published in an anthology: B.B. Yihun (ed.), *Ethiopia and Eritrea: Insights into the Peace Nexus*, Tsehai publishers, Los Angeles 2020, pp. 39-84.
- 2 - President Isaias talked in Tigrinya while prime minister Abiy functioned as his Amharic translator.
- 3 - The reader may rightly suspect that I have dwelt so much on the statement and hence given more credit to president Isaias than he might deserve. I strongly believe that similar views are held by hundreds of thousands of Eritreans, only they are not allowed to express them.
- 4 - See Tekeste 1997, p. 139.
- 5 - Tekeste, Tronvoll 2000, p. 37.
- 6 - Tekeste 1987, pp. 82-83.
- 7 - Spencer 1983; T. Amare, *The Creation of the Ethio-Eritrean Federation: A Case Study in Post-war International Relations, 1945-1950*, University of Denver, 1964; Tekeste 1997.
- 8 - Tekeste 1997, p. 60.
- 9 - According to the census of 1939, Eritrea had a total population of 614,353. The Tigrinya speakers constituted 54 percent of the population. See Tekeste 1987, p. 150.
- 10 - *Ethiopia Observer*, n. 5, 1962, p. 63.
- 11 - See also the table on enrollment in government schools in Eritrea, 1955-62, produced by Wagaw 1979, p. 101.
- 12 - Clapham 1969, p. 77.
- 13 - The first and last effort on the part of the Ethiopian state to involve Eritrea in resolving the conflict was in 1974 when General Aman Andom, head of the Ethiopian military junta, was given the mandate to seek a peaceful solution. His approach was not appreciated, and he was killed on the 23rd November 1974. The Eritrean liberation fronts were jubilant at his death; they were concerned that Aman's continued presence might create a wedge among the Eritreans.
- 14 - I hesitate to extend the term intellectual to the great majority of Eritrean diaspora writers because they do not fulfill the essential requirements of the term, namely a person who examines an issue without any preconceived ideas as to its outcome. See Tesfagiorgis 1993.
- 15 - G. Schröder, *Interview with Eri Medrek*, 2019, an Eritrean TV beamed from beamed from the United States of America. I am inclined to agree with the assessment.
- 16 - *Eritrea Education Sector Analysis* 2017, p. 46. See www.globalpartnership.org/content/eritrea-education-sector-analysis-december-2017
- 17 - The Italians admitted that the Eritrean followers of the Orthodox faith continued to express feelings of irredentism - a view that their country ought to be free from Italian colonialism and reunited with Ethiopia. For more on the politics of the 1930s see Tekeste 1987, pp. 127-31. For the 1941-52 period and the various forms of irredentist movements, see Tekeste 1997, pp. 37-68.
- 18 - The formal independence of Eritrea was made possible by the early support of the Ethiopian government. Led by the TPLF (Tigray), the Ethiopian state (1991-2018) was not keen at all to build on the historical/cultural links that bound the countries. On the contrary, the TPLF-led government attempted to treat Eritrea as any other country - a policy to which the Eritrean president strongly objected. Ruth Iyob (2000), in her highly construed article on differences between Eritrean and Ethiopian nationalisms misses the point of irredentism completely.
- 19 - Emperor Menelik allowed Italy to occupy the three highland districts of Hamasien, Seraye, and Akele Guzay, for which he was severely criticized.

See Tekeste 1986, pp. 1-25. Fifty years later, the people of the three highland districts pursued a highly successful irredentist movement by creating a political party that advocated immediate union with Ethiopia as early as 1942. So much is acknowledged by Trevaskis 1960. See also Tekeste 1994.

20 - Ethiopia has to devise ways of building Eritrean economic capacity in Ethiopia that would eventually expand to Eritrea. Ethiopia is so big (and economically more stable) and Eritrea is so small (in economic terms) that managing relations between the two countries cannot be left to market forces. Ethiopia has to build institutional capacity to deal with the integration of the Eritrean economy.

21 - Once in power, Ethiopian rulers rule for an average of seventeen years.

22 - Apart from the first Woyane rebellion in 1943, Tigray was peaceful throughout the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie (1941-74). Up to 1974, up to a million people from Tigray migrated to other parts of Ethiopia and hence benefited themselves and the communities they lived in.

23 - The idea of Tigray breaking away from Ethiopia has no basis in the history of Tigray and its population. My fear is that some activists from Mekelle (I refrain from using the term intellectuals) are following the destructive script from Eritrea, briefly described in the following words: Eritreans can make it alone and better. This logic brought great damage to Ethiopia but a total destruction of the social, economic, and political fabric of Eritrean society. I hope other activists will challenge the emerging destructive narrative and succeed in showing the history of Tigray and the role that Tigray and Tigreans played (and continue to play) in the making of the multiethnic Ethiopian polity. I hope to return to this subject at a later date.

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Prospettive incoraggianti per buone relazioni tra Eritrea ed Etiopia

“**D**'ora in poi, chi sostiene che Eritrei e Etiopi sono due popoli diversi non ha compreso la verità. Gli Eritrei e gli Etiopi sono un solo popolo in due Paesi”. Queste sono le parole utilizzate dal presidente eritreo Isaias Afewerki nel corso della sua prima visita in Etiopia il 14 luglio 2018.

Come leggere queste affermazioni e, soprattutto, come interpretare la nuova fase delle relazioni tra Etiopia ed Eritrea? Quali sono le prospettive per una pace duratura tra i due Paesi? Al momento – sostiene l'autore – esistono le condizioni per un nuovo confine, riconfigurato, che rifletta i desideri delle popolazioni di entrambi i Paesi e dei rispettivi leader. Difatti, se la pace è dovuta in gran parte al radicale cambiamento politico avvenuto in Etiopia con l'ascesa di Abiy Ahmed a primo ministro, le sue precondizioni hanno fondamenta ben più profonde.

Per comprenderle completamente, è essenziale ripercorrere la storia delle relazioni tra Eritrea ed Etiopia a partire dagli anni Cinquanta. Così facendo, attraverso uno sguardo storico attento e accurato, l'autore individua nella situazione attuale una conferma di una forte corrente irredentista già esistente nella popolazione di entrambi i Paesi, ma soprattutto tra gli Etiopi. Questo irredentismo può essere definito a grandi linee così: molti Eritrei, specialmente i Tigrini, si consideravano parte della nazione etiopica; allo stesso tempo, la maggior parte degli Etiopi considerava l'Eritrea come parte dell'Etiopia. Nonostante molti studiosi nazionalisti eritrei stigmatizzino questo atteggiamento come egemonico, il legame (culturale, storico, geografico) tra i due popoli è molto forte, come dimostrano, tra le altre cose, le reazioni gioiose di entrambe le popolazioni all'apertura dei confini nel 2018.

Tuttavia, il futuro delle relazioni tra i due Paesi dipende principalmente dall'Etiopia e dalla sua capacità di affrontare le sfide che le si parano davanti. Prima tra tutte, rivitalizzare l'economia eritrea, che al momento è quella di un Paese in guerra, in cui tutte le risorse sono controllate dallo stato. È importante che l'Etiopia prenda questo problema molto sul serio, e che non si faccia tentare da un approccio egemonico, che sarebbe considerato dagli Eritrei una seconda colonizzazione. Una seconda importante sfida è quella di mantenere un clima politico favorevole e di rafforzare il governo federale. L'attuale primo ministro dell'Etiopia Abiy Ahmed sembra avere le competenze per potere affrontare queste sfide – se non sarà troppo distratto dalle frammentazioni esistenti nel Paese.