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REVIEW ARTICLE

ERITREA: HISTORIOGRAPHY AND MYTHOLOGY

PATRICK GILKES

IN THE last decade or so, as Eritrean independence has moved from the possible, if unlikely, to the probable, Eritreans have felt the need to discover their own past. The process is gathering pace with the appearance of a number of publications designed to help them do just that.¹ The flight of Mengistu Haile Mariam from Addis Ababa, and the events of May have made it clear that Eritrea's independence will not be long in coming. At the London peace talks, at which the take over of Addis Ababa by the rebels of the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was announced, leaders of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) made it very clear that they would not participate in any interim government in Ethiopia. As one EPLF leader put it—'we didn't fight for 30 years just to get a couple of ministries'. The EPLF underlined the point almost immediately by declaring their own administration, to run Eritrea until a referendum could be held in the region. The EPLF wants the UN to sponsor this referendum which will offer independence, federation or incorporation in Ethiopia; and it certainly believes the first option will be accepted. Equally, it is doing its best to ensure this by making it clear that the interim administration will be made up of the EPLF.

It has been a long time coming. Eritrean guerrillas took up the armed struggle in September 1961, just before the demise of the Ethiopian/Eritrean Federation created by the UN in 1952. The disbandment of the Federation led to claims that the incorporation of Eritrea into Ethiopia was illegal, that Eritrea was a colonial question, and that it should be allowed to exercise the right of self-determination.

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1. Two of the most recent are the books under review: *Eritrea: Even the stones are burning*, by Roy Pateman. The Red Sea Press, Trenton, NJ, 1990. 260 pp. \$35 hardback, \$12.95 paperback. ISBN 0 932415 61 X and 0 932415 62 8; *Eritrea: A pawn in world politics*, by Okbazghi Yohannes. University of Florida Press, Gainesville, Florida. 352 pp. £26.91 hardback ISBN 0 8130 1044 6. Other works which fall into this category include: Bereket Habte Selassie, *Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1980; Bereket Habte Selassie, *Eritrea and the United Nations and other essays*, Trenton, N.J. Red Sea Press, 1989; Lionel Cliffe and Basil Davidson (eds.), *The Long Struggle of Eritrea for Independence and Constructive Peace*, Nottingham, Spokesman, 1988; Amrit Wilson, *The Challenge Road: Women and the Eritrean revolution*, London, Earthscan, 1991; Jordan Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*, Trenton, N.J. Red Sea Press, 1989; Basil Davidson, Lionel Cliffe and Bereket Habte Selassie (eds.), *Behind the war in Eritrea*, Nottingham, Spokesman, 1980; Richard Sherman, *Eritrea: the unfinished revolution*, New York, Praeger, 1980.

These questions polarized opinions among Eritrean and other intellectuals from elsewhere in Ethiopia, as well as foreign historians and political scientists. The arguments over Eritrea did much to split the Ethiopian student movement in the 1960s; and the effects have bedeviled politics since 1974. The failure to agree on policy or solutions helped weaken Mengistu's regime irreparably. Scholars who support the position of Eritrean independence are seen as polemicists or spokesmen for the EPRDF or the EPLF; anyone who suggests that Eritrea might be better off under Addis Ababa is disparagingly referred to as a 'centrist', or a supporter of Amhara imperialism/colonialism. The Amhara are widely, if inaccurately, perceived as the ruling elite of Ethiopia, in part because of the simplistic equation caused by the use of Amharic as a national language.

Much, indeed, of the writing on Eritrea has been at the level of the polemic or a product of the 'guerrilla groupie'. A surprising number of eminent scholars and journalists have taken the leading Eritrean movement, the EPLF, at its own evaluation, and its historical claims as fact. The results have impoverished the literature on Eritrea, and have created a distorted national mythology. Most recent writing on Eritrea, for example, relegates the Amhara and the original liberation front, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) to the role of demon enemies.

Recognition of the process of creating or recreating history has considerable implications for the disciplines of history, anthropology and the social and political sciences. Oral history is spontaneous, vivid and authentic, but its constraints are frequently ignored. What is forgotten is as important as what is remembered, the importance of events inflated, meetings exaggerated or even invented. A mythical 'golden age' is always an element of the past for any individual, and this applies equally for a state. For Eritrea it was the pre-war period of substantial economic growth as Italy rapidly built up a temporary war economy to invade Ethiopia in 1935. It lasted a mere five years, was artificial, and was never intended to be more than transitory. Now it is regarded as the bench-mark by which all subsequent economic policies in Eritrea should be compared, usually to their discredit.

The point is less the inventing of tradition, though that is certainly happening, but the way it is used. Myths are powerful and can and do influence peoples' actions and thoughts. To trace the origins is one way of cataloguing the evidence, whether on the individual or the wider level where the collective myths are used to alter the past. This is not to suggest that a realistic factual account of the past is necessarily more correct or accurate than a mythical one. Both pose the problem of interpretation. History, in this sense, is created by people within a certain specific framework of time and conditions. On the individual level there are the obvious myths that appear regularly: the self-made person; the unhappy childhood; the modest

origins; the successful politician.² On the group level we find equivalents: the tiny guerrilla forces; the overwhelming power of the enemy; the self-reliance of the movement and the lack of outside aid; the conspiracy of opposition; the correctness of ideological choice or of strategic decisions.³ There is a dichotomy between imagination and observation. The need for adequate source material should be self-evident.

Understandably, the EPLF's own literature has been involved in the process of myth formation for Eritrea for some years. There is an obvious and real need for it—though it is less acceptable when hijacked in the service of one element within the nationalist movement. There is much less excuse when outside observers rewrite history in this fashion. It has now become an article of faith that the 'EPLF took on the biggest army in Africa and—after decades of guerrilla fighting—defeated it in full scale land warfare'.⁴ An astonishing military achievement, but one that deserves some serious consideration.

Most experts in anti-guerrilla war argue that a superiority of 10:1 is necessary to defeat competent and well-armed guerrilla forces. The government in Ethiopia not only never had the largest army in Africa (Egypt, for example) but it never deployed more than 120,000–130,000 men in Eritrea at any one time, and the ratio was never more than 4:1 at most; and in the front line areas it was probably 2:1 at best. Dr Pateman devotes a whole chapter to the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Army, the EPLF's military arm; but he, too, expands on this myth of the small heroic guerrilla army fighting against the massed hordes of socialist Ethiopia. It is no denigration of the EPLF to say this is nonsense. In the massive Red Star campaign, the last major effort by Mengistu Haile Mariam's government to break through the EPLF defence lines around the tiny town of Nacfa, by then a symbol of Eritrean resistance, the Ethiopians deployed about 80,000 in combat, and they were facing some 40,000 EPLF fighters and militia with additional zonal back-up. The EPLF were also deployed in excellent defensive positions, virtually as well armed as their opponents with the exception of air power. The EPLF had one extra weapon—morale—and certain tactical advantages. It was not an unequal conflict.

This apparently uncritical acceptance of the mythology leads to other unfortunate lacunae. Dr Pateman is the only person who has done much work on the EPLA, but the result is disappointing. Facts and statistics are based entirely on EPLF sources, and are often suspect. EPLF defeats are simply omitted or dismissed as mere tactical withdrawals in line with EPLF propaganda. Even the disastrous attack on the Naval Base at Massawa

2. Jean Peneff, 'Myths in Life Stories', in Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (eds.), *The Myths We Live By* (London, Routledge, 1990).

3. Alistair Thomson, 'The Anzac Legend', in Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, *op cit.*

4. Neal Ascherson, 'A rare optimism as a new African state appears in the atlas', *Independent on Sunday*, 2 June 1991.

in December 1977 gets no mention, though it was observed by foreign journalists who provided some exceptionally vivid reporting of a suicidal EPLF attack across open salt pans in which casualties ran into hundreds. It would also have been interesting to have had some analysis of what role the EPLF's political commissars had in the military units they were posted to; in the Ethiopian army, the effect was catastrophic. An attempt to assess the importance of the defections to the liberation fronts of most of the Eritrean anti-guerrilla units in 1974 and 1975 would have been valuable; it is likely that they played a significant role in up-grading the quality of the liberation fronts. The circumstances surrounding the death of Ibrahim Affa, the EPLF's chief military strategist for 15 years and the powerful chairman of the military committee, in 1985 or 1986, might have been elucidated; though Dr Pateman does report, without comment, a statement by Issayas Aferworki, the then assistant secretary-general of the EPLF, that the military committee had not functioned effectively for over ten years.

Another uncritically accepted myth is that of the origins and history of Eritrea and Eritrean nationalism. Both Dr Pateman and Dr Yohannes accept without question the prevailing EPLF mythology, and indeed extend it. Eritrea was, of course, a colony, but uniquely in Africa it was, in part, an element in another polity which both pre-dated and survived the colonial period. Historically, in the sense that there was no concept of the area now called Eritrea prior to the 1890s, there is no validity to the Eritrean case. The central part of Eritrea, the districts of Serae, Akele Guzay and Hamasien, were always directly involved in the Abyssinian highland Christian empire, in which the Amhara and Tigrean peoples were the major element. The power fluctuated between them, and indeed between other groups in the empire, including from the mid-eighteenth century, the Oromo. But the links remained, as they did with Massawa and the coast, though that was under nominal and intermittent Turkish, then Egyptian, control for centuries. There were two other separate areas of Eritrea. One was the Danakil desert, the home of several fiercely independent Afar sultanates, one of which claimed lineal descent from the old Sultanate of Adal centered in the city of Harar. To the north and north west were the semi-desert lowland pastoralists, who served as a reservoir for highland raiders, and whose various Beja and Beni Amer clans looked west and north west, not east.

Prior to the Italian takeover there was no link between the disparate areas except in their relationship with the local imperial power, the Abyssinian empire. The use of Eritrea as a concept before the Italians created the region is anachronistic. Dr Yohannes not only uses it in this way, he carries the process a stage further and invents an Eritrea which resisted the advances of Egypt from the 1840s on the one hand, and the pressures of the Emperor Yohannes IV, on the other. He even suggests that the clashes between Yohannes and Egypt, which led to the battle of Dogali in 1876,

were part of a northern drive to annex Eritrea. The end of this line of argument can be summed up by another Eritrean, Dr Bereket Habte Selassie in responding to a claim that Eritrean nationalism was 'rootless'.

A theory of Eritrean nationalism . . . must be derived not only from the armed phase of its struggle . . . It must be traced to the socio-economic and political seeds planted in colonial times. How, otherwise, could a small band of guerrillas grow in 15 years to overwhelm a much larger army, nearly attaining victory in 1977? And how otherwise could the EPLF survive six Soviet-backed offensives?⁵

From the point of view of the myth this argument from success may have much to recommend it, but not from the viewpoint of scholarly accuracy.

The above quotation also reveals another element in the myth. Eritrean nationalism has a long history, but it is the EPLF which brought it to fruition. There has in fact been no serious attempt to write a history of the movements involved in the Eritrean struggle (and neither of the two books under review does more than accept the EPLF's own view of their rivals).⁶ In the 1970s the ELF lost the political initiative, just as the EPLF's assumption of a radical socialist programme changed the image of the Eritrean struggle externally, allowing it to take the propaganda initiative as well. As a result, although the programmes and publications of both the EPLF and ELF were virtually identical, the former was perceived as 'progressive'. It made an important addition to the image of the EPLF guerrilla.

This perception has continued. The EPLF's insistence that Eritrea does not suffer from the usual problems of a multi-ethnic region is widely accepted. During the independence struggle there have been two major civil wars, between the ELF and the EPLF or, in the first case, its potential components. The first, 1972-74 was essentially a draw; the second, 1981-82, resulted in a comprehensive EPLF victory, won with the aid of its close allies, the Tigrean people from Tigrai region to the south of Eritrea. The remnants of the ELF were driven into Sudan where the movement fragmented. But these factions do still exist, despite Issayas's contemptuous dismissal of them as 'irrelevant', and they represent several elements in Eritrean society that the EPLF will have to recognize if it is genuine about its desire for a non-sectarian, non-denominational socialist and pluralist society. ELF groups still have significant support among the Beni Amer societies

5. Bereket Habte Selassie, review of *The Struggle over Eritrea*, by Haggai Erlich, in *Journal of Eritrean Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1986.

6. Tesfatsion Medhane, *Eritrea: Dynamics of a national question*, Amsterdam, B. R. Gruener, 1986, has more to say than most. Uniquely, and bravely, this is pro-ELF, but it is marred by its pro-Soviet position and numerous inaccuracies and unsupported allegations. The best attempts are to be found in: Haggai Erlich, *The Struggle over Eritrea, 1962-78*, Stamford, Hoover, 1983; and John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

along the border areas, and in the refugee camps in Sudan. There are also groups like the Kunama and the Afars who also have a record of unease with the EPLF. The Afar, who inhabit southern Eritrea and within whose territory falls the port of Assab, have very reasonable pretensions to be called a nation and have a state of their own. None of these are problems that the EPLF are unable to solve, but it would be interesting to have some analysis of EPLF thinking on the subject, rather than a bland regurgitation of the claim that no problem exists.

There are other questions to ask about Eritrean nationalism. If its roots do not predate Italian colonialism, was it the result of the 50 years of Italian rule? All too often, unwarranted assumptions are made, based on alleged Eritrean resistance to Italian rule. In fact, evidence from the Italian records suggest otherwise.⁷ There are indications that the critical period is really the period of the Federation and of the interference by the Ethiopian federal authorities. A considerable amount has been written on the legal aspects of the dissolution of the Federation, but little on a period during which time the Ethiopian regime failed conspicuously to persuade the Eritreans, nearly half of whom certainly did support union before 1952, that unification could have real benefit. Equally, however, the great surge of support from the Christian Tigrean highland agriculturalists only came in the 1970s. Indeed, it is arguable that it came as a result of the army's repression after the nearly successful attack on Asmara in January 1975.

The role of the super-powers is where mythology creeps in again. Dr Yohannes is largely concerned with their role, and their failure to support the Eritrean cause. He argues that the conflict was in fact essentially caused by collusion, in particular between the US, the USSR and, originally, Britain, to back Eritrea and ignore Eritrean claims to independence. And he claims that the 1952 Federation was imposed conspiratorially, against the wishes of the people. The evidence would rather suggest that the UN General Assembly decided on a Federation because the divisions in the Eritrean political establishment left it no alternative at that time. Dr Yohannes's version provides an excellent example of 'innocence violated'.

Eritrea seems likely to take its independence in the next couple of years, though it still has a lot to do to persuade other powers in Africa or elsewhere that this is either sensible or desirable. Neither of these books show the degree of analytical rigour or scholarly accuracy that would provide such persuasion. None of this is intended to disparage the Eritrean struggle or even its nationalist mythology. It is, however, a plea for serious scholarship and genuine intellectual investigation of Eritrea and its history. This has so far been in short supply.

7. Tekeste Negash, *No Medicine for the Bite of a White Snake: Notes on nationalism and resistance in Eritrea, 1890-1940*. Uppsala, Uppsala University, 1986.