

# ECAS 2013

5<sup>th</sup> European Conference on African Studies (Lisbon)

June  
27-29



African Dynamics in a Multipolar World

ISCTE - Lisbon University Institute

## **ECAS 2013**

5<sup>th</sup> European Conference on African Studies

*African Dynamics in a Multipolar World*

©2014 Centro de Estudos Internacionais do Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL)

ISBN: 978-989-732-364-5

## **COMPETING IDENTITIES AND THE EMERGENCE OF ERITREAN NATIONALISM BETWEEN 1941 AND 1952**

**Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad**  
College of Social Sciences,  
Department of Sociology and Human Geography  
University of Oslo, Norway

[a.s.mohammed@sosgeo.uio.no](mailto:a.s.mohammed@sosgeo.uio.no)

**Abstract**

*This paper investigates the historical and socio-political background of Eritrean nationalism and dismantles the myth of a unique Eritrean national identity: It explores the emergence of nationalism during the British Military Administration (1941–52) and its inconsistency. Eritrea is a multi-lingual state at the Horn of Africa that was occupied by different colonial powers. Resistance arose in the nineteenth century as protest against Abyssinian hegemony and against colonial domination. Yet, nationalism was not a product of modernisation induced by Italy, which affected only limited segments of the society (highlanders). It developed only after the demise of Italian rule after 1941, when Eritrea witnessed democracy and press freedom under the British rule. However, due to ethnic frictions, nationalism was inconsistent and conflict-ridden.*

**Key Words:** Eritrea, nationalism, identity, British Military Administration

## **Introduction**

The Horn of Africa has been identified by scholars and politicians as a region of endemic conflicts and wars between states and within the nation states, caused by antagonistic ethnic and cultural diversities. For the inhabitants of the region, this meant displacement, loss of their material existence, and loss of relatives as common features of their lives. These conflicts have been persistent throughout centuries. In the face of Abyssinian regional hegemony, anti-Abyssinian resistance movements played a crucial role in developing and defining the political national consciousness and identity among the local groups of the Horn. The external colonial powers Britain, French and Italy did not eliminate anti-Abyssinian sentiments, but on the contrary they exploited them in order to pursue their own interests by supporting those who best served the interests of the new masters. In the case of Eritrea, regional resistance movements against the expansion of Abyssinian hegemony were at place prior to Italian colonisation (1890 to 1941), although a collective national consciousness was absent during that time. Eritrean society is heterogeneous in nature, based on a variety of cultures, languages and religious groups. There are nine distinguished ethnic population categories that have their specific identities, many of whom are marginalized due to the domination of one ethnic and linguistic group - the Tigrinya highlanders - who succeeded in getting access to the state apparatus and the administration during the Italian and British colonisation, as well as during the period of Ethiopian domination from 1952 to 1991. Thus, the majority of the population and especially the Muslim communities welcomed the Italian colonial occupation as protection against the violent expansion of Abyssinian rule coming from Tigray and against the local *kebessa* nobility. Accordingly, various Muslim leaders signed agreements of protection and cooperation with the Italians in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Under Italian rule, there was local resistance against certain

Competing identities and the emergence of Eritrean Nationalism between 1941 and 1952 colonial policies, but co-ordinated nationwide nationalist movements could not emerge due to a restrictive educational policy and limited integration of the population into the structures of the colonial administration. After World War II, the idea of union with Ethiopia attracted the majority of Christian Tigrinya highlanders, while the majority of the Muslim communities rejected this option due to their historical experience of resistance against Abyssinian ambitions to incorporate the Red Sea coastal population into their power sphere by force. Accordingly, they developed a national Eritrean consciousness and identity under the liberal British policy, which led to power struggles between the pro-Ethiopian political parties and the pro-independence parties.

This article will focus on the historical emergence of nationalism in Eritrea and is divided into five parts. The first part elaborates the concept of nationalism in relation to self-determination and emancipation. The second part evaluates the British Military Administration period (1941-52) and the establishment of competing and conflicting political parties, which should be seen as the background of the development of Eritrean nationalism. The third part will deal with the role of the Four Power and UN Commissions and Haile Selassie's influence on the United Nations' decision-making process. The fourth part analyses the inconsistency of identities due to ethnic and religious affiliations and how these linkages were instrumentalised by the Ethiopian regime and the Orthodox Church. The fifth section presents the main argument of the author by tracing the emergence of Eritrean nationalism back to the short period of the BMA, and by doing so it aims at dismantling the myth of the existence of a unique Eritrean nationalism prior to that period.

### **The concept of nationalism**

Ethnicity can be classified as social and cultural identity, while nationalism can be described as a concept of national identity and loyalty to the nation state. There are interdependencies between both concepts in relation to the national state and its ruling elite. However, nationalism and ethnicity can also co-exist in a given nation state peacefully or conflict-ridden and it is difficult to separate the two categories of identities from each other.

*Nationalism and ethnicity are part of a modern set of categorical identities evoked by elites and other participants in political and social struggles. These categorical identities also shape everyday life, offering both tools for grasping pre-existing homogeneity and differences and for constructing specific versions of such identities, while it is impossible to dissociate nationalism entirely from ethnicity. It is equally impossible to explain it simply as a continuation of ethnicity or a simple reflection of common history or language (Calhoun 1993: 211-239. See also Dorman, Hammet et al. 2007*

A nation-state is a more or less centralized, independent political entity which is sovereign over its territory and population. The word “state” is generally used as a political and legal term in which the state power claims exclusive control over its territory and recognition by the international community. Nation-building is a process of state formation and a conscious political effort to create unity and loyalty of the citizens towards the state (Bondegaard 2004: 14-15). The term nationality is used to identify the citizenship of a person and the relationship between that person and the nation-state of which he or she is a citizen. Anderson and Eriksen stress that nations are ideological constructs, with the purpose of creating a link between a cultural group and a state in order to generate an ‘imagined community’ among people of different social and cultural backgrounds (Anderson 2006: 46; Eriksen 2010: 119-20). Accordingly, nationalism is a state of mind in which the supreme loyalty of an individual is directed to the nation-state, which he or she considers to be the only legitimate form of political

Competing identities and the emergence of Eritrean Nationalism between 1941 and 1952 organization (Farnen 1994: 45). According to Tronvoll, nationalism is basically an ideological expression of identity which reflects the common feelings and sentiments of a certain group of people due to shared historical experiences, symbols and cultural traditions (Tronvoll 2009: 206). It is an identity which is linked to a territory and may, *inter alia*, contain notions of common descent, joint political interests, mutually understandable values and norms. Consequently, from the perspective of a state and its ruling elite, the nationalist identity is supposed to overcome sub-national identities (be they ethnic, regional, or religiously defined). In the case of the Horn of Africa, ethnic and national categories of identification have always been conflict-ridden due to the domination and hegemony of specific groups. During the 1960s, when many African states gained their independence, nationalism was seen as a political principle which was supposed to facilitate the incorporation and integration of the different ethnic groups into the state and the subordination of ethnicity to political and national unity. Therefore, nationalism was considered as a positive factor in the African context and achieved a high level of attention as a base for modernization and development in the framework of the nation-building process of the newly independent states. It was supported by the former colonizers as a stabilizing factor in multi-ethnic societies, which was supposed to overcome tribal, ethnic, and religious boundaries within the state. According to Smith, nations and nationalism are a creation of modernity, and thus the theorists of nationalism seemed to agree on the psychological and sociological power of nations and nationalism (Smith 1998: 2-3). A widespread belief among social scientists grounded in the writings of Max Weber was that the importance of ethnicity as a component of identity construction would decrease or disappear as a result of modernization, centralization of power, and urbanization in these emerging nation-states, while Marxist theory assumed that ethnicity as a false consciousness would eventually evaporate and be replaced by an objective class

Competing identities and the emergence of Eritrean Nationalism between 1941 and 1952 consciousness (Yasin 2010: 18-19). Contrary to these predictions, primordial ties and other forms of ethnic identity grew in political importance after World War II and have maintained their political and social significance until today (Eriksen 2010: 2-3). Thus, ethnic nationalism was an important component contributing to the emergence of a collective political consciousness.

Nationalism in the regions of the Horn first arose as a pattern of resistance and protest against colonial domination and against regional hegemony of the Abyssinians. Ethiopia had never been colonized, but rather acted as a colonizer by itself. The Ethiopian ruling elite used nationalist ideologies as a tool to establish a central monopoly of power, including the control over land and the scarce resources of the peripheral communities. According to Markakis, 'access to the state usually meant access to these resources' (1998: 186; see also Mohammad 2013: 64-5). The Abyssinian ruling elites manipulated the population by subtly elevating their own language and culture to play a dominant role in the society's concept of nationalism. They regarded themselves as unifying, modernizing and integrating elements of the multi-ethnic state.

*[In] state-led nationalism, the rulers demanded that citizens should subordinate all other interests to those of the state, which led to the subsequent emergence of nation. In states seeking nationalism, leaders sought to create new states which could pursue the interests of distinct populations with a specific cultural identity; nationalism created states (Oommen 1997: 15).*

The Abyssinian rulers, namely the Amhara and the Tigrayans, followed the same strategies as elaborated by Oommen and created a perception of nationalism based on hegemony and domination over the surrounding peripheral communities by imposing their own cultural traits and symbols on all citizens. With the support of the colonial powers (Italy, France and

Great Britain), the Abyssinian rulers institutionalised their respective elites as power holders from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century on and were thus able to spread a particular form of nationalism based on the hegemony of one specific ethnic group in order to secure their concepts of national integration and political stability, while at the same time maintaining their political power. Thus, feelings of attachment to sub-national identities were suppressed in favour of state-centred nationalism, especially those of dominated minority groups. Abyssinian rulers often used violent conflicts as a tool to strengthen the collective national identity by enforcing distinctions between the “in” and the “out” group (Tronvoll 2009: 7). For the purpose of consolidating their authority, they employed mobilizing strategies to manipulate the population according to their own perception of nationalism, in which national identity is explicitly or implicitly linked to the dominant ethnic identity (Mohammad 2013: 65-6). This historical praxis of hegemony of the Amhara and the Tigrayans under the pretext of nation-building was relevant during the struggle for Eritrean statehood which started in the 1940s, but still repeats itself in the modern states of Ethiopia and Eritrea, respectively. Thus, the disadvantaged groups in Ethiopia and Eritrea are experiencing the same kind of domination today; for example the Somali, Afar and some of the Oromo in Ethiopia and the Kunama, Afar, Saho and the Hedareb in Eritrea. They feel excluded from the nation-state and many disassociate themselves from Ethiopian and Eritrean nationhood, respectively. The OLF (Oromo Liberation Front) spokesperson Lencho Bati, when interviewed by Kjetil Tronvoll, elaborated the OLF’s view which also represents that of other alienated ethnic groups of the region:

*For a nation to exist or to flourish it needs to produce citizenship. People need to identify themselves with the state; people need to identify themselves with the leaders of the state; people need to identify themselves with the history of the state. When it comes to the Oromo, we do not identify ourselves with the state, because the state marginalizes us. We*



*do not identify ourselves with the leaders of the state, because most of the leaders belong to the North and serve the interests of the North. We do not identify ourselves with the history of the state, because most Ethiopian history is written in such a way as to serve the rulers and the makers of the Ethiopian state, who are the Amhara and the Tigray. So this is how the Oromo view the Ethiopian state” (Tronvoll 2009: 190).*

### **The British Military Administration and the rise of competing political parties**

Like most African countries, Eritrea was a colonial creation. In pre-colonial times, a land with fixed boundaries called Eritrea did not exist. The territory was politically fragmented and consisted of competing local entities operating independently under the rule of local authorities. Only in 1890, the Italians gave their new-born colony the name Eritrea. After the collapse of Italian colonial rule in 1941 in the course of World War II, Eritrea came under the control of Great Britain. While Somalia and Libya, the other former colonies of Italy, gained their independence smoothly, the situation in Eritrea was much more complicated due to the frictions among the different political parties, which promoted their specific ethnic, religious and regional identities and failed to develop a unique national vision in regard to the independence of Eritrea (Araya 1990: 79-100). Thus, its future was at stake during the British Military Administration (BMA), and the options of independence, federation, ‘reunification’ with Ethiopia, or partition of the territory, were controversially discussed. The British responsibility was to maintain law and order until a decision about its future would have been made and to facilitate the fact-finding missions of the Four Powers and the UN Commissions in 1947 and 1948, respectively. In addition, its policy was to motivate the Eritreans to establish their own organizations and by encouraging them to debate about their future (Tsehaye 2011: 4). Haile Selassie, who had been exiled during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1936-41), returned to the Ethiopian throne after the end of World War II and started to mobilize the Eritrean Christian Tigrinya people, including

those who had settled in Ethiopia. The Emperor's claim to Eritrea was encouraged by Winston Churchill, who promised him that Eritrea was to be given to Ethiopia as a reward for his support of British policies in Africa, especially in the Sudan and the Nile Valley (Abbay 1998: 54). Thus, Haile Selassie made arrangements to organise, finance and mobilise pro-Ethiopian Christian Tigrinya, and the first target group of his campaign were Eritrean refugees who had fled to avoid conscription by the Italians and soldiers (*askari*) who had defected during Italy's occupation of Ethiopia between 1936 and 1941. They were supposed to commit terror acts inside Eritrea against groups who opposed the unification agenda, and the Muslim communities in particular. The second and main target of his campaign were those educated Eritrean highlanders who enjoyed the privilege of working in Ethiopian government institutions, a benefit from which many educated indigenous Ethiopian citizens were excluded. In 1941, members of these groups established the Party for the Love of the Country (PLC, in Tigrinya: *mahber fikri hager*). This party was organized, funded and supervised by the Ethiopian government. According to Tekeste Negash, the Ethiopian-based PLC was working underground in Eritrea as long as the BMA did not allow the establishment of political parties (Negash 1997: 37). It was later re-established under the name Society of Unification of Ethiopia and Eritrea (SUEE) (Gebre-Medhin 1989: 72-3, 81-3). According to Ellingson, '*its members felt that Italy had "stolen" Eritrea and that on the grounds of historic, cultural, religious, geographical and economic connections with Ethiopia, it should be "returned" immediately*' (Ellingson 1977: 261-281; see also Trevaskis 1977, 60-1). Another Ethiopian-based party was the Ethiopia Hamassien Society, which was known as *netsa hamassien* (Free Hamassien), an organisation which, according to Trevaskis, incorporated the Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia and was financed and directed by the Ethiopian government

Competing identities and the emergence of Eritrean Nationalism between 1941 and 1952 (Trevaskis 1977: 65-6)<sup>1</sup>. All these organisations united in 1946 and established the Unionist Party (UP). Its chairperson was Dejazmatch Beyene Beraki. A typical pamphlet which appeared on the walls of Asmara in 1943 read as follows:

*Eritreans! [it read] Remember your Mother Ethiopia! Your Mother will not deny you and you, her sons, must not deny her. She will feed you. The Italians beat you and dishonored your women. The British starve you and fatten the foreigners”* (Trevaskis, 1977: 61).

On the other hand, the British administration, under the impression of the political and religious frictions between Christians and Muslims, suggested the partition of the Eritrean territory into two parts. The eastern part should be united with Ethiopia and the western part with the Sudan.

*Muslim tribal areas adjoining to the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan should be included in that country. The central Christian highlands with the port of Massawa and the Semhar and the Saho tribes should form part of a united Tigray state or province (...). The Danakil country with Assab should be assigned unconditionally to the Emperor* (Longrigg 1974: 174-5).

The Ethiopian government supported the UP via its Liaison Officer in Asmara, Colonel Negga Haile Selassie, who was responsible for the coordination of UP activities and the smuggling of weapons to arm its young militant members. In addition, the UP collected annual membership fees and started to mobilise the clergy, the peasants, the merchants and intellectuals under the pretext that the British allegedly planned to return Eritrea to Italian control. This situation led to violent conflicts between Muslims and Christians, as for instance in the city of Asmara, where *‘[t]he increasing hostility and polarization between Eritrean Christian and Muslim communities reached a dramatic crescendo in August of 1946’* (Venosa 2007: 36; see

---

<sup>1</sup> Gebre Meskel Habtemariam, the director of the Ethiopian Ministry of Post and Telegram, was its chairperson (Ellingson 1977:269).

also J. Markakis 1987: 64-5). The Orthodox Church and the UP represented two sides of the same coin. According to Trevaskis, '[b]y 1942, every priest had become a propagandist in the Ethiopian cause, every village church had become a centre of Ethiopian nationalism, and popular religious feast days such as "Maskal" (the Feast of the Cross) had become occasions for open displays of Ethiopian patriotism' (1977: 60). Meanwhile, the Tigray-Tigrinya Party was founded by *Dejazmatch* Tessema Asberom (a Tigrinya nobleman) in Akelle Guzay, whose family had links to the nobility of Tigray. It was officially known as Liberal Progressive Party (LPP). The supporters of the LPP were mainly recruited from mission-educated intellectuals from Asmara and its surroundings (Longrigg 1974: 170). He favoured the unification of Eritrea with the Tigray Province because power within Ethiopia had shifted towards the Amhara nobility in Shoa after the death of Emperor Yohannes IV 1889, and his wish was to create a counter-balance to this power shift. During the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (1936-41), Tigray and Eritrea had been administered as one single province, and he wanted to maintain this unification. His aim was to establish "Tigray-Tigrinya" as an autonomous state under British administration. By doing so, he responded to the uprising in Tigray against the rule of Haile Selassie (the first *weyane*) which took place in the early 1940s. Alemseged Abbay describes this development as the re-emergence of "trans-Mereb unification" and "Tigray-Tigrignie" nationalism. He also demonstrates how the intellectuals and most enlightened *kebessa*<sup>2</sup> elites were blind of Ethiopian nationalism and that they welcomed Ethiopia's direct intervention in the affairs of Eritrea (Abbay 1998: 37). Their shared myths, historical memories and cultural affinity shaped their common identity. It is important to note that Woldeab

---

<sup>2</sup> *Kebessa* is the Tigrinya term used for the Eritrean highlands as a geographical term, as well as for the Christian Orthodox inhabitants of this region. The non-Tigrinya groups living with them are identified by their ethnic affiliation as Saho and Tigre, while the Tigrinya-speaking highland Muslims are called Jeberti.

Woldemariam, who was later called “the father of Eritrean nationalism”, and who at that time acted as the editor of the weekly British Information Office’s Tigrinya newspaper, was among the promoters of Tigray-Tigrinya separatism (Trevaskis 1977: 62-6; Markakis 1987: 63-4; Negash 1997: 23).

*The LPP argued that before the advent of Italian colonialism, Tigray and Eritrea used to be a unit of the ‘Land of Agazi’ or ‘Nation of Agazi’ or ‘Tigray-Tigrignie’ and when Italy occupied Ethiopia (1936 - 1941), the ‘two sisters’ that had been separated for fifty years were reunited. It was legitimate for them that the two should be reunited in an independent ‘Tigray-Tigrignie’ (Abbay 1998: 38).*

Later, the LPP split and one faction joined the Independence Bloc because of conflicts with the Unionist Party, which rejected the Greater Tigray option put forward by Woldeab Woldemariam and other *kebessa* intellectuals, while another faction under the leadership of Seyoum Ma’asho agitated for unconditional unity with Ethiopia<sup>3</sup>. In order to unify their forces against the aggressive approach of the Unionist Party, the Eritrean pro-independence politicians and leaders came together in the ‘*wa’ela Bet Giorgis*’ (an assembly held in Bet Giorgis, a suburb of Asmara) in November 1946. ‘*They were mainly merchants and former employees of the Italian administration and included Christian Copts and Muslims, as well as Protestant converts*’ (Markakis 1987: 62-3). However, the meeting was infiltrated by agents of the UP and therefore failed to achieve any agreements. According to Jordan Gebre-Medhin the nationalist standpoint of the Muslim leaders was disregarded by the *kebessa* intellectuals. ‘*The Jeberti, Saho, and Massawa intellectuals who felt betrayed by the Christian politicians withdrew from Kebessa politics. Led by Berhanu Ahmedin, they joined Ibrahim Sultan in founding the Moslem League*’

---

<sup>3</sup> Source: <[http://mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=125&category=hawadith\\_mukhtar](http://mukhtar.ca/contentN.php?type=viewarticle&id=125&category=hawadith_mukhtar)>, accessed 10.05.2013

(Gebre-Medhin 1989: 96). Thus, Muslim representatives and traditional tribal leaders from all regions of the country gathered together in Keren in December 1946 to plan the establishment of a political party under the name 'Al-Rabita al Islamiya al Eritriya' (the Muslim League/ML)<sup>4</sup>. It favoured the Independence of Eritrea within its old colonial boundaries, unless it would come under the trusteeship of Great Britain or the United Nations. The ML was inaugurated officially in 1947 as a reaction to the Christian (*kebessa*) pro-Ethiopian activism. During its first general meeting in Keren, the ML's General Secretary, Ibrahim Sultan affirmed to the pro-independent Christians that the activities of the league were not directed against Christians, because Muslims and Christians are "brother's and children of the same homeland" (Venosa 2012: 46). The Khatmiyya Sufi order played an important role in unifying the scattered Muslim groups; its leader, Sayyed Abubaker al Mirghani was assigned as a symbolic leader of the ML. It was a multi-ethnic party with branches in all regions. This runs contrary to the arguments of modernist scholars that African nationalism was the creation of a colonial and missionary-educated urban elite assimilated to western culture and values. The ML was a mass organisation which incorporated the traditional leaders from the rural areas as well as the small educated urban Muslim elite<sup>5</sup>. The Muslim League was created with the full intention of its members to reject an Eritrean union with Ethiopia. *'Clearly the recent trends within Eritrean society had demonstrated to the league that the Ethiopian state, dominated by the Christian Amhara highlanders, had little concern for the grievances of Muslims in Eritrea who were*

---

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that both the Grand Mufti Ibrahim al Mukhtar and Sufi leaders of the Khatmiyya contributed decisively to the establishment Muslim educational centers and charity associations prior to the arrival of the British, which fostered the consciousness of Muslim intellectuals. The mufti's major contribution to Eritrean nationalism was to mediate the political rifts within the ML and to motivate the Muslim intellectuals to create a broader organization.

<sup>5</sup> These intellectuals received their primary education in Islamic institutions and Quran schools in Arabic language, while formal education beyond the elementary level was absent during the Italian period, and instruction was in Italian language.

Competing identities and the emergence of Eritrean Nationalism between 1941 and 1952 *largely considered outsiders*' (Venosa 2007: 38-9; see also Mohammad 2013: 211-12). The party used different methods to mobilise the Muslim communities, such as mass media – they had their own newspapers and radio broadcasts in Arabic language, preaching at Mosques during Friday prayers, and speaking to Muslim communities during marriage and funeral ceremonies, especially in the rural areas. It is also important to note that former *askari* who had returned to their villages of origin played a decisive role in mobilising the rural population.

Tekeste Negash argues that '*[i]t was (...) the British who twisted the arms of the Moslem leaders in Eritrea to form the Muslim League (ML) towards the end of 1946*' (Negash 1997: 31), but empirical evidence shows that this is not correct. The Muslims, on their own initiative, had tried their best to participate in the formation of different nationwide organisations striving to fight for Eritrea's independence, together with a few Christian colleagues; however, they were side-lined by the intrigues of the pro-Ethiopian Tigrinya who betrayed them in different manners. The ML affirmed its determination to strive for the full independence of Eritrea and rejected the partition policy of the British administration.<sup>6</sup> Under the threat of the British partition plans and the Ethiopian unification policy, several controversial parties reached a minimum consensus and formed the 'Independence Bloc' (IB) in 1949. The Bloc consisted of a variety of small parties such as the New Eritrean Pro-Italian Party, The Veteran Association, the Liberal Progressive Party, and the Eritrean Party for Independence, but was dominated by the Muslim League. Ibrahim Sultan (ML) was elected Secretary General and Woldeab Woldemariam (LPP) became his deputy (Ellingson 1977: 276; Markakis 1987: 66-7; Venosa 2007: 62-5).

---

<sup>6</sup> The ML made a clear statement against unification in front of the Four Power Commission: "Is it just that a still barbaric and primitive nation such as the Ethiopians – whose government is unable to improve the lot of its own people – should come into possession of a territory which is far more disciplined, advanced and civilized than the Abyssinians?" (Four Power Commission, Appendix 107, 2, cited by Ellingson 1977: 273).

### **The commissions of the four allied powers and the united nations**

The Four Allied Powers (Britain, France, USA and the USSR) were the first to take the responsibility of discussing and deciding about the future of the former Italian colonies (Eritrea, Libya and Somalia) and accordingly, they sent a commission of inquiry to Eritrea in 1947. The Four Power commission stayed in the country from 12 November 1947 to 3 January 1948 and held meetings with the representatives of the different political parties. However, it could not come up with a common opinion on the future of the territory, due to Ethiopia's involvement in the Eritrean affairs. The pro-Ethiopian political parties intimidated and terrorised the members of independence-oriented political parties, especially the members of the Muslim league, during the Four Power Commission's visit. Thus the matter was transferred to the UN General Assembly in 1949. The United Nations sent a commission composed of five member nations (Burma, Guatemala, Norway, Pakistan and South Africa) to Eritrea in order to gather information and to elicit the desires and wishes of the people in regard to the country's future. The mission, who stayed in Eritrea for two months (from 9 February to 9 April 1950) also failed to reach a common agreement to be presented to the General Assembly (Markakis 1987: 48; Venosa 2007: 47-8). Thus, the General Assembly had to cast its vote over four proposals: First, Eritrea to be annexed to Ethiopia; second, Eritrea to be given independence status; third, the establishment of a trusteeship of the UN under Italian administration or another Western power; fourth, the partition of the territory between Ethiopia and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (Jacquin-Berdal 1999: 149). During the investigation of the United Nation Commission, the members of the ML and the Independence Bloc were targeted by the youth organization of the UP:

*Terrorism and violence were supplemented by a campaign of threats against the Italians and the Eritrean supporters of the Bloc. In many cases, the armed gangs of Christian*



*Abyssinians or Shifta left letters or pamphlets at the scene of their outrages, threatening Italians with death if they supported the Bloc, and warning Eritreans that they and their families would suffer if they did not abandon it. The Coptic Church published a warning in the columns of Ethiopia, a Unionist publication which first appeared in 1948, that the Church would not grant facilities as regards baptism, marriage, burial, communion, and absolution to members of the Bloc or to their families (Trevaskis 1977: 96).*

Abdulkader Mohammed Saleh Kebire, the President of the Muslim League of Asmara and Hamassien, was assassinated by a thug hired by the Unionists in 1949, just before his planned departure to New York where he was supposed to present the Eritrean case to the United Nation's Assembly (Ellingson 1977: 277; Markakis 1987: 67; Gebre-Medhin 1989: 79-80). Tensions aggravated in February 1950, when many people were killed during communal fighting in the streets of Asmara. The terror campaign of the UP, combined with the threats of the Orthodox Church to ban independence supporters, coerced many Eritreans to abandon their support for independence and to join the unionist camp (Markakis 1987: 67).

*Rural inter-ethnic violence was also a lingering problem. Particularly throughout 1950, there were frequent reported incidences of clashes between Muslim Tigre and their Christian counterparts from Hamassien and Serai, and between the Muslim Saho and their Christian neighbours in Akelle Guzay. There were frequent Christian assaults on the Muslim minorities in the highlands, known as 'Jiberti'. According to Ibrahim Sultan's bitter recollection of acts of aggressive Ethiopian nationalism, faces were disfigured, hands or fingers were cut off, and to add insults to injuries, the Koran was defiled and mosques were burnt: 'The brutality of the hyena devouring the donkey is nothing compared to what the Christians did in Eritrea' (Araya 1990: 86-7).*

After the Independence Bloc had fallen victim to its internal frictions, Woldeab Woldemariam formed a new party with the odd name Independent Eritrea United to Ethiopia Party (IEUEP) advocating the independence of Eritrea, while at the same time requesting unification with Ethiopia. This has been interpreted as a campaign for "conditional union" or *de facto* federation (Trevaskis 1977: 98; Markakis 1987: 67; Negash 1997: 53). Ruth Iyob justifies

Woldeabs position by saying that he found himself in between the Unionists and the pro-independence factions and regarded “conditional union” as a compromise in order to avoid the imminent partition of Eritrea (Iyob 1995: 68). This justification does probably not reflect the proper motives of Woldeab. It can be assumed that he was torn between two distinguished identities and therefore shifted his loyalty according to the political situation. Having ancestral roots in Tigray, he was brought up in Asmara and educated by Protestant missionaries. Thus, his primordial identity was most likely shaped by his Tigrayan origin, while his religious affiliation distanced him from the Orthodox-dominated Unionist Party. In addition, the political turmoil of the 1940s had an impact on his political attitude towards the Eritrean nation and made him reluctantly join the Independence Bloc. Meanwhile, the fragile Independence Bloc<sup>7</sup> was further weakened and eventually split into several parts, some of which were co-opted by the UP. The BMA, which was supposed to facilitate the United Nation Commission’s inquiry, was unable to stop the terrorist attacks of the UP and its youth league against independence supporters, while the government of Ethiopia intensified its support to the UP financially and militarily (Venosa 2007: 72).

In 1949, the highland Muslims (Saho and Jeberti) clearly demonstrated their concern about the activities of the UP and the *shiftas* across the border, including killings, stealing of cattle and burning harvests to the UN Commission (Mohammad 2013: 219-20).

*It is a fact that the Eritrean hinterland is today at the mercy of the terrorist bandits who are shamelessly active on behalf of foreign elements. Acts of robbery and arson have become quite common and are reminiscent of the dark ages, so much so that communications between the principal towns have been seriously interrupted except for caravans under police guard. Yet the present Administration in Eritrea has taken no*

---

<sup>7</sup> “Between October 1949 and February 1950, violence caused further disunity among members of the Independence Bloc. During this period, nine Italians, one Indian, one Greek, three Christian supporters of the Bloc and four Muslim tribesmen were assassinated” (Ellingson 1977: 277).

*serious steps to crash these bandits and to rid the country of their terror, whereas this action would be within its power, had it cared to fulfil its obligation to the Eritrean people*<sup>8</sup>.

In addition to the violence it committed against its adversaries, the UP manipulated the UN Commission's report about the *kebessa* and the attitudes of its Muslim inhabitants by dressing themselves up as Muslims and travelling from town to town and village to village. The Ethiopians provided them with means of transportation and weapons, while the representatives of the Muslim League were harassed, intimidated and neither allowed to make their statements nor to appear in front of the Commission for hearing. When the UN Commission returned once more to Eritrea in February 1950, the UP intensified its activities against the members of the ML (Venosa 2007: 68-74; Mohammad 2013: 221-2; see also Gebre-Medhin 1989: 147-9; Iyob 1995: 78). The unrest spread throughout the Eritrean territory, including Akelle Guzay, Seraie, the Red Sea coastal area and Gash-Barka. *'On the plateau itself, the sturdy Muslim minority in the Serai clashed with the Christian majority and, with help from Beni Amer and to some extent from the Saho, gave a surprisingly good account of itself'* (Trevaskis 1977: 109). According to Trevaskis, *shifita* activities intensified in the rural areas of the highlands: in 1950, the average number of *shifita* attacks including killing, plundering and stealing cattle was about 85; in May 1951, the figure had risen to 130 (*Ibid.* 111).

Due to the splits and violent conflicts among the different political parties and the population at large, the members of the UN Commission did not come to a common conclusion. The delegates of Norway<sup>9</sup>, Burma and South Africa proposed that *'Eritrea should be a self-*

---

<sup>8</sup> 49<sup>th</sup> meeting of the *ad hoc* political committee, 21 November 1949, UN Document A/AC.38/1.46, 120-26; cited by Venosa 2007: 72, see also Markakis 1987: 66-7.

<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that the Norwegian delegation insisted on the unification of Eritrea with Ethiopia on the one hand, but on the other hand it suggested that the Western Province should remain under British administration for a fixed period, after which the population should decide if it wished to join the union with Ethiopia or the Sudan.

Competing identities and the emergence of Eritrean Nationalism between 1941 and 1952

*governing unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown*', while the Pakistani and Guatemalan delegations argued that due to the large Muslim population and the important Italian minority, Eritrea should first become independent under a Council of Trustees and should decide about its future after a period of ten years. Yet, the United Nations General Assembly, which was under the pressure of the USA,<sup>10</sup> France and The Soviet Union<sup>11</sup> who favoured the Ethiopian claims to Eritrea, adopted the majority suggestion of the Commission in 1952 and accordingly decided that Eritrea should be federated with Ethiopia (UN resolution 390A (V)) (Trevaskis 1977: 100-1; see also Iyob 1995: 79-81; Negash 1997: 58-9).

### **Inconsistent identities within the competing political parties**

Due to inconsistency of identities, the Eritrean society was divided into two opposed groups across religious and ethnic lines. However, the religious identity pre-dominated the ethnic and regional identities, which facilitated the Ethiopian claim to Eritrea. Politicisation and instrumentalisation of religious and ethnic affiliations were aggressively promoted by the Christian Tigrinya groups, who linked themselves to Abyssinian history. The Tigrinya Christians identified themselves with Ethiopian nationalism which claims to have a history of three thousand years and to be anchored in the medieval writings of the *fetha nagast* (the Law of the Kings) and the *fekere yesus* (the Love of God) (Gashaw 1993: 139). For the Tigrinya-speaking groups, their religious affinity with Ethiopia and their primordial affinity to the Tigrayans constituted one of the most important marks of identification. They recalled the ancient Axumite

---

<sup>10</sup> Ethiopia strengthened its claim to Eritrea direct by direct intervention and through diplomatic efforts. The USA supported the Ethiopian claim in order to obtain a strategic presence at the Red Sea Coast.

<sup>11</sup> As a consequence of the Cold War, the Soviet Union tried to strengthen its relations with Ethiopia to counterbalance US hegemony in the region, a development welcomed by Emperor Haile Selassie, who used "the Soviet card" to gain impact on US policies by threatening to shift alliances.

civilisation and long Christian tradition and perceived Eritrea as a geographical, historical and cultural extension of the Axumite Empire (Trans-Mereb or *Mereb Mellash*) since time immemorial (Araya 1990: 82). According to Woldeab Woldemariam, joining Ethiopia was a matter of life and death<sup>12</sup>. He believed that Eritrea will suffer and die unless it unites with Ethiopia and his struggle and desire was not to separate Eritreans from Tigrayans and Eritrea from Tigray (Abbay 1997: 321-34; *Id.*, 1998: 30-1). On the contrary, the Muslim communities clearly defined independence as the most promising setting and rejected any kind of link with the Ethiopian Empire, which they associated with marginalisation and discrimination (Markakis, 1988: 51-70). Yet, the interference of the Ethiopian government and its instrument, the UP, as well as the meddling of the British administration in the internal affairs of the ML led to frictions among its members along ethnic and regional lines, which can be described as follows:

First, the Muslim League lacked a sufficient financial budget in contrast to the UP, which had unlimited access to financial support provided by the Ethiopian government and the Orthodox Church. In addition, the ML had made serious attempts to overcome regionalism and ethnic divisions at the beginning, but later became the victim of direct Ethiopian involvement. Haile Selassie distributed bribes and promised the Beja and Habab *shemagelle* (nobles)<sup>13</sup> they would obtain privileges if they joined the UP. Thus, the ML was further weakened and split into regional branches. Second, the ethnic cleavages within the Muslim League were exacerbated by

---

<sup>12</sup> It is really interesting and amazing how, as time passes, Tigrinya leaders like *Ras* Woldemikael, Bahta Hagos and Woldeab Woldemariam were declared and keep being remembered as nationalist heroes of modern Eritrea by the Tigrinya highlanders, especially by EPLF supporters. Bahta Hagos had first welcomed the Italian colonialists and later rebelled against them in support of Ethiopia, and *Ras* Woldemikael raided and plundered the rural areas of Eritrea and abducted women and children, while Woldeab Woldemariam's dream had been to establish "Tigray-Tigrinya", the "Great Tigrinya Nation".

<sup>13</sup> The *shemagelle* were the tribal leaders of the Beni Amir (Hedareb) who were the dominant ethnic group in the western lowlands. They owned land and cattle and made use of the *tigre* (serfs) as cattle herders and milkers. At the same time, the term "Tigre" refers to the linguistic and ethnic group which lived in the Sahel, Semhar, Anseba and western lowland regions of Eritrea.

Ethiopian attempts to disintegrate the ML. For example, there were tensions between the *tigre* (serfs) and the *shemaggalle* (nobles) in the western lowlands. The Tigre emancipation movement was supported by the BMA and accordingly they became politically aware and joined the ML as active members. Ibrahim Sultan, who originated from a Tigre clan, was selected as the general secretary of the ML. However, his appointment was not approved by the Beja and Habab *shemagelle* who considered him as inferior due to his *serf* status. The government of Haile Selassie exploited these social cleavages within the Tigre ethnic group to discredit Ibrahim Sultan and to create frictions within the Muslim League in general. In addition, Ibrahim Sultan<sup>14</sup> was accused of being an agent of the Italians and working for Italian interest, an argument brought forward by the UP and the Ethiopian government (Trevaskis 1977: 96-8; Ellingson 1977: 278; Gebre-Medhin 1989: 98). This issue was used by the UP and the Haile Selassie government, which promised the *shemagelle* to restore their power and authority over the serfs, to allow them to pasture their animals inside Ethiopian territory, and to protect their transhumance movements from the attacks by the *shiftas*, if they supported the federation option. Accordingly, the Muslim League branch of the Western Province under the leadership of Ali Mussa Radai split from the ML and formed a new party under the name Independent Muslim League of the Western Province (IMLW). Initially, Ali Mussa Radai had favoured the partition of the country between the Sudan and Ethiopia, but later he changed his mind and accepted the federation with Ethiopia due to the Ethiopian promises and also to avoid tensions and blood feuds between the Beni Amer and their Hadendowa neighbours in the eastern Sudan (Trevaskis

---

<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Woldeab Woldemariam, the leader of the LPP, was confronted with allegations that he was not of Eritrean origin at the *wa'ela Bet Giorgis*. He was verbally attacked by the UP's chairman Tedla Bairu who claimed that he was not entitled to speak in the name or on behalf of the indigenous Eritreans (*dekeabat*) because he was an immigrant from Tigray, which means he was of Ethiopian origin (Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle*, 69). Actually, Woldeab's father originated from a village near Axum called Adi Kilde, his mother was from Shire in Western Tigray (Abbay 1998: 62).

1977: 74-5; Ellingson 1977: 287; Markakis, 1987: 67; Mohammad 2013: 215-8).

Third, the Semhar Tigre also split from the Muslim League due to regional sentiments and formed their own branch, the “National Muslim League of Massawa” (NMLM) under the leadership of its secretary general Osman Adem *Bey* from the *naib* family. At the beginning, he had opted for British trusteeship for a period of ten years in order to avoid the federation option. But the Ethiopian government and the UP committed acts of terror and intimidated the leaders of the ML in urban and rural areas alike. Under raids, plunder and threats of life, the Massawa and Asmara Muslim merchants finally opted for the federation project (Markakis 1987: 65; Venosa 2007: 45-6; Trevaskis 1977: 109-10). However, Ibrahim Sultan, the general secretary of the Muslim League and leader of the Independence Bloc articulated in his speech at the United Nations General Assembly that the denial of basic human rights would bring instability and war to the region. Trevaskis, who had served as a colonial officer under the BMA from 1943 to 1950 and had a deep knowledge of Eritrean society, predicted what was to come during the following years in the case of an Ethiopian violation of the Federal Act and of the Eritrean Constitution:

*With British authority withdrawn from the Sudan, with British influence removed from Egypt, and with an independent Somalia already in sight, Ethiopia is becoming encompassed by ambitious, vigorous, and free Moslem states. In such circumstances, Moslem discontent in Eritrea would be singularly dangerous. The Moslem leaders in Eritrea came to learn the political value of their Islamic connections during the latter part of the Occupation. If they have reason for discontent in the future they will undoubtedly exploit them. Should they do so, their appeals are likely to command Moslem sympathy, entailing the threat of active subversion and encouragement to revolt, not only among the Moslems of Eritrea, but among the very much larger Moslem population of Ethiopia as well (Trevaskis 1977: 130).*

### **The emergence of Eritrean Nationalism between 1941 and 1952**

As has been well illustrated in academic scholarly writing, nationalism is associated with a nation-state as a political principle and shapes the collective consciousness and sentiments of an identity. It demands unconditional loyalty from its citizens in order to create and to establish national cohesion. This paper argues that Eritrean nationalism emerged during the BMA and was cemented during the thirty years of armed struggle against Ethiopian domination. Yet, there are different opinions and interpretations regarding the question when Eritrea started to exist as a nation: the first one asserts that Eritrea as a distinguished territorial unit (*Mereb Mellash*) existed prior to Italian colonisation (Ogbazghi 1991). Second, there is an Ethiopian line of argumentation which claims that Eritrea was an integral part of the Abyssinian Kingdoms and civilisation and that colonialism was imposed on it (Negash 1997; Abbay, 1998). The third approach claims that Eritrean nationalism has its roots in the Italian colonisation period (Mesghenna 1988; Gebre-Medhin 1989; Iyob 1995; Hirt 2001; Naty 2001: 573-89; Chelati 2004: 533-74; Bereketeab 2002: 137-52; Pateman 1990). The fourth group of scholars, including myself, argues that Eritrean nationalism emerged during the post-colonial period under the British Military Administration and culminated in the armed struggle (Araya 1990; Gilkes 2003: 163-85; Mohammad 2013: 62-70). The first and the second arguments do not hold scientifically, as there was no territorial unity within the area which is now called Eritrea before the Italian colonisation, and Eritrea did not exist as an integral part of the Abyssinian Kingdoms. Only the highland was directly or indirectly ruled by the Abyssinian Empire, which periodically exercised its power through its representative, the *bahr negash* (literally: the “king of the sea”), while the coastal Semhar region and its surroundings was under the domain of the Ottoman and later the Egyptian Empire, which were represented by the local *naib* (“deputy”) family in Massawa. In



Dankalia, the Afar had their own sultanates and *sheikhdoms* and defended their independence against highland superiority, while the western lowland was nominally under Turko-Egyptian rule with the centre Taka (Kassala) in Eastern Sudan. Thus, the larger part of the Muslim communities had never been under Ethiopian domination before Eritrea was incorporated into Ethiopia by Haile Selassie. *'The Muslim communities of Eritrea, with some exceptions, were not under the rule of Ethiopian empires until the inauguration of the Ethiopian-Eritrean Federation in 1952'* (Pool 2001: 26).

In the view of supporters of the third option, the Eritrean society witnessed radical transformations which initiated the development of Eritrean nationalism under Italian colonisation. The Italians brought together the various ethnic and linguistic groups, who began to develop new identities that reached beyond their primordial ties. In 1990, Roy Pateman claimed that the Eritrean national identity began to take deep roots during that period, which was to become the source of Eritrean pride and territorial nationalism. He also claimed that the Italian rule broke down the semi-feudal and semi-communal ties and administrations of the various nationalities and brought them together (Pateman 1990). Generally, the modernist view focuses mainly on the positive innovations introduced by the Italians, such as urbanisation, a transportation system (especially the railways) and the development of the Massawa and Assab ports, while modern irrigation and cash-crop production were initiated in the agricultural sector. They also encouraged the migration of peasants from Tigray to Eritrea, who settled in *kebessa* as labour force. In addition, the Italians recruited a large number of soldiers (*askari*) into their army who settled in cities and towns with their families. This group contributed significantly to the urbanisation process and developed a national consciousness due to their involvement in various colonial wars (Sorensen 1991: 301-17; Woldemikael 1993: 179-99; Bereketeab 2002: 140-2; Chelati 2004: 5-8; Pateman 1990).

The fourth opinion acknowledges the role of the Italians in developing the infrastructure of the territory, but denies the significance of Italian colonialism for the emergence of Eritrean nationalism. According to Alemseged Abbay, the Italian influence beyond Asmara was minimal. Access to consumer goods as well as adoption of modern Western values was restricted to Asmara city and its surroundings. Similarly, John Markakis postulates that Eritrean nationalism did not emerge as a reaction to Italian rule, but after its demise and collapse during World War II (Abbay 1998; Markakis 1998: 51; see also Mohammad 2013: 68-9). I agree with the proponents of the third option for the following reasons:

1. During the BMA between 1941 and 1952, the Eritrean national consciousness grew due to the politically hospitable environment created after World War II. Accordingly, the British allowed the expansion of education and the spread of mass media in Arabic, Tigrinya, Italian and English languages. In addition, the population was allowed to organise themselves politically and to debate about the future of the former Italian colony. Clapham illustrates that the Eritreans did not develop a national identity under Italian rule, and before its demise the population was not encouraged to discuss about the future of the territory (Clapham 2001: 8).
2. The political consciousness among the different segments of the society grew due to the strained economic situation after World War II, when the number of unemployed increased in the urban centres. Although the Eritrean nationalist movements have their roots in a long history of local resistance, it was not before the period of the BMA that political consciousness spread beyond the regional level.

3. Among the different Muslim ethnic communities, the development of a collective consciousness of being Eritrean was facilitated by Ethiopian involvement in the country's affairs through acts of intimidation, terror, and killings, which contributed to constitute an Eritrean national identity.
4. In most Francophone and Anglophone colonies, the missionary-educated elite developed a national consciousness and played a leading role in the rise and the emergence of nationalism during the de-colonisation period, and accordingly they mobilised the masses to fight for emancipation and to achieve their independence. In Eritrea, the situation was quite different due to absence of such a nationwide educated nationalist elite, because of the following facts:
  - a) The most important reason for the lack of a common nationalist ideology was that the Italian rulers prevented the emergence of educated Eritrean elites which could have functioned as leaders of the anti-colonial movement, as had been the case in most Africa countries (Gilkes 2003). They restricted education beyond the elementary level. Even the few Italian schools and most missionary schools were concentrated in the cities of the Tigrinya-inhabited highlands and their surroundings.
  - b) The majority of non-Tigrinya ethnic groups and especially the agro-pastoral communities in the eastern and western lowlands were excluded from education and paid employment. These segments of the society had only the possibility to attend *Quran* schools in Arabic language. Thus, the non-Tigrinya urban dwellers were excluded from formal employment opportunities due to lack of education and knowledge of the Italian language.

- c) The Italian rule had no profound modifying and unifying effect on the traditional communal ties of the Eritrean society in general and the agro-pastoral communities in particular. On the contrary, they exacerbated the ethnic and religious cleavages to pursue their own interests.
- d) The small urban elite who was assimilated and favoured by the Italians and who were considered to be more politically conscious due to their relative closeness to the Italian administration paradoxically engaged in active pro-Ethiopian nationalism after the demise of the Italian colony (Tsehaye 2011: 4). Its members identified themselves with the Ethiopian nation due to their religious affinity with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and their primordial affinity with the Tigrayans. According to Mesfin Araya, the ethnic sentiments and primordial ties which had been less important under the colonial rule suddenly appeared to be a most vital issue and a significant marker of identification among the *kebessa* Tigrinya (Araya 1990: 82).

Thus, Muslim Christian confrontations and Emperor Haile Selassie's direct involvement in Eritrean affairs by claiming it as part of "Greater Abyssinia" fostered the political consciousness and solidarity among non-Tigrinya communities, which strengthened their national sentiments and identity (Mohammad 2013: 71-2). On the contrary, Tigrinya speaking groups followed the footsteps of their Muslim fellows only in 1974, when the military took power in Ethiopia and they lost their privileges. Only then, they joined the liberation movements in large numbers and eventually dominated the field.

Generally speaking, the Eritrean politicians and intellectuals of the 1950s failed to develop a common and unique national identity due to their cultural and religious divisions and due to the involvement of external and regional powers in their internal affairs (Ogbazghi 1991: 129-30).

*Haile Selassie was able to dismantle the 'federation' not because he was strong, but because no serious attempt had been made to create an all-embracing Eritrean identity. Admittedly, the major political parties had categorically rejected the idea of partition as a solution. However, their behavior ought not to be interpreted as a reflection of growing national consciousness, because both the Unionists and the anti-Unionists perceived Eritrea mainly in terms of their respective ethnic communities (Araya 1990: 89-90).*

## **Conclusion**

Nationalism is basically an ideological and political expression of loyalty and a common identity among the citizens of a nation in order to achieve allegiance to a polity. Thus, modern nationalism in the Horn of Africa has its historical roots in the resistance of agro-pastoral egalitarian political communities against the regional hegemony of the Abyssinian imperial rulers, as well as against external powers such as the British, French and the Italians. In the case of Eritrea, the Italian colonial rule was accepted by most local leaders and authorities, as they believed the Italians could protect them from the violent expansion of Abyssinian supremacy.

Eritrea is a multi-lingual and multi-religious territory, and all the nine ethnic groups maintained their specific local authorities at the regional levels. The Italian colonial rule maintained the traditional regional boundaries and integrated only specific parts of the population (Christian Tigrinya-speaking highlanders) in the process of modernization through infrastructure development and urbanization. While the highland regions were incorporated into the colonial administrative structures and profited from the Italian-induced development, the Muslim majority, and particularly the pastoral and agro-pastoral groups were excluded from this process, which led to their marginalisation. In the absence of general socio-economic integration and a collective political consciousness, a unique vision towards Eritrean nationalism could not develop during this period. After the demise of the Italian colonial rule during the Second World

War, Eritrea came under the British Military Administration. The responsibility of the BMA was to maintain law and order and to prepare the former Italian colony for its future. Accordingly, it allowed and facilitated the establishment of political parties, the expansion of mass media and education in Arabic and Tigrinya as well as in English and Italian. In this hospitable environment, the Eritreans developed political awareness and among the Muslim communities a collective consciousness, opposing any kind of linkage with Ethiopia, emerged. Under the leadership of the Muslim League, they propagated for independence and rejected the partition plans of the British. On the contrary, the pro-Ethiopian Unionist Party fought for unconditional unification with Ethiopia, while the Liberal Progressive Party campaigned to establish a “Greater Tigray” nation by incorporating the Eritrean highlands into the Tigray Province of Ethiopia. Both parties stressed the linguistic and religious affiliations and the common history, tradition, and culture of Eritrean and Ethiopian highlanders. Under these conflicting circumstances, the Four Power Commission failed to reach a common agreement about the future of the territory in 1947, and the matter was transferred to the UN General Assembly in 1949. The UN sent a commission of five members which also failed to reach a common position due to the political divisions among Eritreans reflected by growing frictions within the political parties, and due to the Ethiopian involvement through intimidation, violent attacks and terror against members of the Muslim League in particular and the Independence Bloc in general. At the same time, the USA and some European countries supported the Ethiopian claim and pushed for the incorporation of Eritrea into Ethiopia, which materialised under UN resolution 390 A (V) in 1952. To sum up, there are different opinions and interpretations in regard to the question when Eritrea started to exist as a nation. Yet, this paper argues that Eritrean nationalism emerged during the British Military Administration, when nationwide political consciousness grew and a national identity

Competing identities and the emergence of Eritrean Nationalism between 1941 and 1952 crystallised due to the hospitable political environment. The British initiated the expansion of education in Arabic and other languages, the spread of mass media, and they encouraged the establishment of political organisations<sup>15</sup>. They supported the emancipation of the *tigre* (serfs) from the *shemagelle* (nobles), which strengthened the political base of the Muslim League. In this democratic environment, it became evident that the Eritrean society was deeply divided across religion and regional affiliations and split into two contradictory opinion groups. One group favoured unification with Ethiopia, while the majority of the Muslim segments of Eritrea favoured the independence option. Moreover, the development of a collective consciousness of being Eritrean among the different Muslim ethnic groups was facilitated by the violent attacks and killings of innocent civilians committed by the Ethiopian Haile Selassie government, which contributed to cementing an Eritrean national identity. Thus, the Muslim communities became the founders of the Eritrean national resistance movements during the federation period.

## References

- Abbay, Alemseged 1998: *Identity Jilted or Re-imagining Identity*. Lawrenceville, NJ and Asmara: Red Sea Press
- Abbay, Alemseged 1997: 'The Trans-Mareb Past in the Present', in: *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 35 (2): 321 – 334
- Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad 2013: *The Saho of Eritrea; Ethnic Identity and National Consciousness*, Berlin: Lit- Verlag
- Abdulkader Saleh Mohammad (ed.) 2009: *The Customary Law of the Akele Guzai Muslims [The Saho]*. Translation with Introduction. Berlin/Münster: Lit-Verlag
- Anderson, Benedict [1983] 2006: *Imagined Communities , Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, London and New York

---

<sup>15</sup> However, they preserved the existing autonomous regional boundaries and motivated the various ethnic groups to rely on their respective customary laws. Orally transmitted law codes were written down in order to be used in conflict mediation and settlement. These customary administrative and legal foundations could have served as pillars of a future independent Eritrea.

- Araya, Mesfin 1990: 'The Eritrean Question: An Alternative Explanation', in: *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 28(1): 79 -100
- Bereketeab, Redie 2002: 'Supra-Ethnic Nationalism: The case of Eritrea', in: *African Sociological Review* 6 (2): 137- 152
- Bondegaard, C. 2004: 'The Battalion State. Securitization and nation-building in Eritrea', *PSIS Occasional Paper*, 2/2004, <[http://www.PSIS-OccPap-2\\_2004-Bundegaard.pdf](http://www.PSIS-OccPap-2_2004-Bundegaard.pdf)>, accessed 07.08.2012
- Calhoun, Craig 1993: 'Nationalism and Ethnicity', in: *Annual Review of Sociology*, 211-239
- Clapham, Christopher 2001: *War and State Formation in Ethiopia and Eritrea*, paper presented at the States Conference Florence, 10 – 14 April 2001; [www.comm.ucsb.edu/faculty/mstohl/failed\\_states/2001/papers/CLAPHAM1.pdf](http://www.comm.ucsb.edu/faculty/mstohl/failed_states/2001/papers/CLAPHAM1.pdf), accessed 03.05.2013
- Dorman, S; Hammet, D. et al. 2007: *Making Nations, Creating Strangers*, Leiden and Boston: Brill
- Ellingson, Lloyd 1977: The Emergence of Political Parties in Eritrea, 1941-1950, in: *Journal of African History* (18), No.2, 261-281
- Eriksen, Hylland Thomas 2010: *Ethnicity and Nationalism. Anthropological Perspectives*. New York, NY: Pluto Press, 3rd edition
- Farnen, Russell, F. 1994: *Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Identity. Cross-National Comparative Perspectives*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers
- Gashaw, S. 1993: 'Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia', in: Young, C. (ed.): *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism. The Nation-State at Bay?* Madison, WI, 139
- Gebre-Medhin, Jordan 1989: *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*. Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press
- Gilkes, Patrick 2003: 'National Identity and Historical Mythology in Eritrea and Somaliland', in: *North-East African Studies* 10 (3): 163-185
- Hirt, Nicole 2001: *Eritrea zwischen Krieg und Frieden. Die Entwicklung seit der Unabhaengigkeit*. Hamburg: Institut fuer Afrika-Kunde. Hamburger Beitrage zur Afrika-Kunde 62
- Iyob, Ruth 1995: *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence. Domination, Resistance, Nationalism from 1941 – 1993*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press



- Jacquín, Dominique Berdal 1999: *Nationalism and Succession in the Horn of Africa: A Critique of the Ethnic Interpretation*, Ph. D Thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, University of London
- Longrigg, Stephen. H. 1974 [1945]: *A Short History of Eritrea*. Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Markakis, John 1998: *Resource Conflict in the Horn of Africa*. London: SAGE Publications
- Markakis, John 1988: 'The Nationalist Revolution in Eritrea, in: *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 26 (1): 51-70
- Markakis, John 1987: *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Mesghenna, Yemane 1989: *Italian Colonialism: A Case Study of Eritrea 1869-1934*. Maryland.
- Müller, Tanja 2012: 'From Rebel Governance to State Consolidation – Dynamics of Loyalty and the Securitisation of the State in Eritrea', in: *Geoforum* 43: 793-803
- Naty, Alexander 2001: 'Memories of the Kunama of Eritrea towards Italian Colonialism' in: *Africa*, 56 (4): 573- 589
- Negash, Tekeste 1997: *Eritrea and Ethiopia. The Federal Experience*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet
- Ogbazghi, Yohannes 1991: *Eritrea, a Pawn in World Politics*. Gainesville: University of Florida
- Oomen, T.K. 1997: *Citizenship and National Identity. From Colonialism to Globalism*. London and New Delhi: SAGE Publishers
- Pateman, Roy 1990: *Even the Stones are Burning*. Trenton, NY
- Pool, David 2001: *From Guerillas to Government. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front*. Oxford: James Currey
- Rich Dorman, Sara 2005: 'Narratives of Nationalism in Eritrea: research and revisionism', in: *Nations and Nationalism* 11(2): 203-222
- Smith, Anthony D. 1998: *Nationalism and Modernism*. London and New York: Routledge
- Sorenson, John 1991: 'Discourses on Eritrean Nationalism and Identity', in: *Journal of Modern African Studies* 29 (2): 301-317
- Trevaskis, G.K. 1977 [1960]: *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition 1941 – 1952*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2nd edition
- Tronvoll, Kjetil 2009: *War and the Politics of Identity in Ethiopia. Making Enemies and Allies in the Horn of Africa*. Woodbridge: James Currey

- Woldemikael, Tekle M. 1993: 'The Cultural Construction of Eritrean Nationalist Movements', in: Young, Crawford: *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism. The Nation-State at Bay?* Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 179-199
- Tronvoll, Kjetil 2009: *War and the Politics of Identity in Ethiopia. Making Enemies and Allies in the Horn of Africa*. Woodbridge: James Currey
- Tsehaye, Meressa 2011: *Bridging the Gaps: The Need for Positive Engagement to the National Security Challenges in Eritrea*. Mekelle University, College of Law and Governance
- UN Commission for Eritrea 1950: 'Linguistic Diversity in the 1950's. Eritrea Fifth Session - Supplement No. 8' (A-1258) New York: UN
- Uoldelul, Chelati 2004: 'From Warriors to Urban Dwellers. Ascari and the Military Factor in the Urban Development of Colonial Eritrea', in: *Cahiers D'Études Africaines* (175): 533-574
- Venosa, Joseph. 2012: ' "Because God Has Given Us the Power of Reasoning": Intellectuals, the Eritrean Muslim League, and Nationalist Activism, 1946-1950', in: *Northeast African Studies*, Vol. 12 (2): 29-62
- Venosa, Joseph L. 2007: 'Faith in the Nation: Examining the Contributions of Eritrean Muslims in the Nationalist Movement, 1946 -1961'. Ohio: M.A. Thesis
- Yasin, Mohammed Yasin 2010: 'Regional Dynamics of Inter-Ethnic Conflicts in the Horn of Africa: An Analysis of the Afar-Somali Conflict in Ethiopia and Djibouti'. Hamburg: PhD Thesis

\* The author is grateful to the University of Oslo, Department of Sociology and Human Geography for hosting him as a senior researcher and the Institute of International Education for its encouragement and financial support.