

# **History, Historical Arguments and the Ethio-Eritrean conflict: between xenophobic approaches and an ideology of unity**

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## **Abstract**

Historical arguments play a significant role in the Ethio-Eritrean conflict. Both sides bear on history in order to confirm their opposing political goals, Eritrean independence versus the Ethiopian idea of unity. Discussing existing historical sources on the area, the present article makes shows the relevance of historical authentication for the conflicting sides as well as their consistent misuse of historical facts. It is argued that it is high time for removing historical arguments from the heated debates in the political sphere, and situating them again in the realms of historiography proper.

## **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to discuss and evaluate the role of historical arguments and facts in the current conflict, in other words, to discuss what history can do and cannot do, and, secondly, to discuss several historical facts, which are often overlooked. A chronic problem in the region is the fact that history is recorded and rewritten differently by every concerned party. When Ethiopians and Eritreans speak of history, one can get the impression that they do refer to different regions, even though they mean the same. There is a great need of knowing more about history and its role in shaping the Horn of Africa as it is now, which also means: of knowing more of each other. The underlying pattern, until now, is an uneasy mixture of xenophobia (on both sides) and a strong claim to be "one" (from the Ethiopian side), which is, however, not combined with a sound knowledge about the history and the experiences of the other.

In this text I look at the historical arguments brought forward by the parties involved. Some historical arguments are evoked to demonstrate that the

generalizing assumptions typical for both Ethiopian and Eritrean discourses are usually too simple and, at times, altogether wrong. But, in fact, historical arguments as a whole are rejected as political arguments. If I demonstrate here that the historical arguments used are incorrect, it is to show their function as political instruments; history delivers different answers than politicians expect. Historical arguments have to be removed from the political sphere and brought back where they belong to: back to historiography.

### **The role of historical arguments in the discourse of conflict**

Talking of history in Eritrea and Ethiopia means talking of ideological disputes; a great number of historical statements are highly controversial. History as a systematic discipline, of course, is often perceived as describing facts, and therefore it is perceived as an objective science. Facts, however, are subject to *interpretation*, if not conscious or unconscious *falsification*, following national myths, traditions and interests - which is a problem in any region of the world. Seemingly only the accurate documentation of millions of facts (together with their diverging interpretations) may lead us to an at least approximate approach to the reality of the past. *Simple* statements always are problematic and only in a few cases not ideological.

#### ***a) The dissense in the public historical debate of Ethiopia and Eritrea***

One of the crucial "simple statements" which could be heard already three decades ago during the Eritrean struggle for independence<sup>1</sup>, and later during the Ethiopian-Eritrean war, is: "Eritrea has always been part of Ethiopia". This is at best a gross oversimplification, if not simply untrue. Also the opposite statement - "Eritrea has never been part of Ethiopia" - has no basis in history. Anywhere in the world, the public interpretation of what historians say is subject to ideological reinterpretation, history being instrumentalized, and its interpretation following subjective convictions. A conscientious historian would not say that Eritrea "always" belonged to Ethiopia, as he/she knows that only central Eritrea had been integrated into

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<sup>1</sup> The first Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict ended only in 1991 and led to Eritrean independence (formalized after a UN-supervised referendum in 1993). According to Eritrean historiography, their "war of liberation" started in 1961; it developed from local guerilla war into a large-scale war already in the late 1970s. It depends on the perspective if one speaks of a "civil war", a "war of secession" or a "liberation war".

the Ethiopian system of vassalage. But the time seems not yet ripe to give history back to researchers in the highly emotional context of this conflict. History is owned by political conflict brokers, who impose their interests and patterns of argumentation even on scholars.

At the beginning of the war the renowned Ethiopian historian Bahru Zewde, author of the excellent historiography "A History of Modern Ethiopia" (1991), gave an interview to the Amharic weekly newspaper "Reporter". One of the questions, freely translated into English, was the following: "Some Ethiopians think that the current Ethio-Eritrean border is not really Ethiopia's true boundary and that Ethiopia can go far beyond that and legitimately claim Gash-Setit. What is your opinion on this?" Professor Bahru answers: "If it is a matter of claims, Ethiopia's claim is not Badme, but Eritrea itself. But we are now discussing the issue in the context of international agreements. If history however was to determine the fates of Ethiopia and Eritrea, they should never have separated."

The background of this discourse is the perception, widespread in Ethiopia, of Eritrea's separation as artificial and temporary. To continue with the interview: The only case, in which Bahru Zewde mentions a historical separation of an Eritrean region from Ethiopia is that of the Ottoman port of Massawa. Here he underlines that its separation from Ethiopia was due to *foreign* incursions. He also mentions that historical Eritrean personalities who opted for independence, "*defected*" from their original intention to stay with Ethiopia. Professor Bahru thus makes clear that Eritrean independence was a sort of a historical accident and a consequence of "Eritrean chauvinism" as he puts it, a heritage of the colonizers, which is, he doesn't say that, but one cannot help but thinking of it, *therefore* deeply illegitimate<sup>2</sup>. Bahru Zewde's argumentation shows a certain pattern, which is crucial to understand the debate on the war - which is also a debate of historians. It has to be stressed, that his examples, which support the identity of Eritrean and Ethiopian history<sup>3</sup>, are historically correct. However, some facts, which are also important to understand the region, are missing. Summarizing

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<sup>2</sup> Professor Bahru underlines, however, very rightly that the main reason for the historical rupture between Eritrea and Ethiopia was the politics of the federal government under Haile Selassie: "During the period of federation, a grave error was committed and this was the dissolution of the Ethio-Eritrean federation." - Cf. the concentrated analysis of the recent history in relation with the present conflict: Gilkes/Plaut (1999).

<sup>3</sup> It would, however, be better to speak of an identity between the Eritrean highlands' and the Abyssinian empire's history.

Eritrean history he says for example that "Eritrea" was called "Mereb-Mellash" before the arrival of the Italians; he does not mention, however, that large lowland parts of Eritrea were not actually part of that former Ethiopian province. Any of his further examples are correct, but only examples are provided which (rightly) prove the close historical links between Eritrean regions and the central government. One of the important characteristics of this "border region" (as he himself calls it), however, is typically the influence of *different* powers trying to lay hand on it, sometimes even simultaneously, so that there were periods when regions shifted to the respectively "other side" and back again. Nowhere in his interview does Professor Bahru mention, for example, that there were regions in Eritrea - especially the Muslim lowlands, the Beni Amer in the northwest, the Afar in the southeast - whose history has been separate from Ethiopian history over very long periods. It is exactly that information, however, which could contribute to a better understanding for and of the great centrifugal forces which separated Eritrea from Ethiopia, even if this is certainly only one factor among many (some of them not historical - important to underline in such a historicised debate). One statement by Professor Bahru himself somehow shows a way out: He suggests that history is *not* to determine the fates of Ethiopia and Eritrea.

On the other side there are well-known examples of radical attempts of re-writing Eritrean history, which lead to quite opposite effects, but results showing a *parallel* pattern. Roy Pateman (1990:32), a scholar who is strongly relying on papers written by the various liberation fronts of Eritrea, stated one year before the end of the struggle for independence: "No Abyssinian king ruled the Eritrean plateau in this period", speaking of the eighth to the fifteenth century. This generalization cannot be supported by facts<sup>4</sup>. Pateman's book is a good example for the quite interesting, but often lacuneous attempts to re-define historical Eritrea. His choice to radicalize the existing historical differences between the different regions and provinces of the North-Abyssinian plateau, however, goes far beyond historical facts<sup>5</sup>. The pattern he uses is structurally similar to the arguments

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<sup>4</sup> Clapham (1992:137) in his very critical review of this book points out that Pateman himself proves the contrary by citing (on page 157 of his book) "imperial land grants" in the Eritrean region from this period. - See also, on the investiture of Hamasen chiefs by the Ethiopian King of Kings in the 18th century: Pankhurst (1981).

<sup>5</sup> For another approach see the publication on the historical frictions within the Tigrinya society: Trivelli (1998).

known from Ethiopia: In modern Ethiopia there is a strong popular belief that Ethiopia in its today's shape is rooted in very ancient times, even if only 150 years ago Ethiopia was still a very different state, encompassing much fewer regions as it does today. The venerable age of a state or a dynasty, however, even if (partly) constructed, has always been an effective instrument to create legitimacy<sup>6</sup>. This also explains why partisans of Eritrean independence in our days sometimes feel a need to find old "specifically Eritrean" roots for Eritrea.

*b) Patterns observed in the public debate*

The assertions of both sides testify to a great dissent in the public historical discourses. It is striking that arguments are usually formulated with a high degree of certitude, while they express exactly the contrary of each other. During the war similar patterns could be observed. There had been a lot of theories on the causes or roots of the conflict, but most publicists seemed to know quite exactly that *theirs* were the right ones, even if diametrically opposed to what the others say. Also discourses on other issues concerning Ethiopia and Eritrea show a similar pattern: One side says the exact contrary of the other.

From the outbreak of the conflict to the present, historical arguments have played a crucial role. Gradually, such arguments became even more important, as the conflict itself *produced* new historical roots of the conflict. This is an important factor too easily forgotten by analysts of "historical roots", who take them as given, thus following a somehow essentialist approach. History itself is certainly not a fiction, but historical arguments, being used for the war, *are* - at least in the way and in the context in which they appear: they may tell stories which already had lost (most of) their significance before. Historical facts, unknown to most, or forgotten, then assume the role of "unforgettable" memories dominating the political identity of "all people". Ethiopian press and politicians, for instance, started to compare Eritrea's leader with Mussolini, thereby recalling an old trauma of Ethiopian nationalism, the 1936 fascist invasion of Ethiopia, which usually no one identified with modern Eritrea. Eritrean media in their turn recall the hard times under the dictator Mengistu, identifying these bad

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<sup>6</sup> This is very effective in Ethiopia, which always celebrated her noble and ancient origins, in writing, through legends, and by imperial rituals (until the downfall of the monarchy), thus creating legitimacy.

memories of a brutal government more and more with Ethiopia as a country. In Eritrean historical memory this bloody dictatorship is re-defined as a "foreign occupation", which finds its continuation in the present conflict. Thus, these xenophobic identifications of the other with an "essential" evil poison the necessary reconciliation between the peoples.

Following a somehow opposite, "Pan-Ethiopian" pattern, reference is also often made in Ethiopia to the age-old unity between Eritrea and Ethiopia. As Bahru Zewde said in the interview: "Aksum was the hub of the Axumite Empire which in its inner tier encompassed Tigray and Eritrea and extended to Wollo, parts of Sudan and the Red Sea in the outer tiers of its territorial domain. Hence, the history of Ethiopia during the Axumite period was unequivocally a history of unity and political and economic cohesion." Some underline that Eritrea, as the cradle of Ethiopian civilization (the Eritrean highlands having been part of the Aksumite Empire), can never be separated from Ethiopia, and a separation – such as the one of today – was nothing but highly artificial, a separation which should and *will* therefore be abolished in the near future<sup>7</sup>. In reaction to that, historians in Eritrea try to trace Eritrean history independently from the old centralistic traditions of imperial historiography.

Observed from outside this situation is most interesting. Contrariness as such is not a problem - it might be stimulating. Every new perspective has the potential to reveal new aspects in old stories which we thought to know well before. Even if, for instance, there has certainly been no "Eritrean" identity before the arrival of the Italians in the 1880s, local identities did exist<sup>8</sup>. There is still a great deal to do in local history and especially ethnohistory. One can get new insights into the relationship of the peoples to their leaders and how this influenced their local traditions and social organisation. What is important now is an open discussion of the diverging viewpoints. However, still today the contrary dominates: A xenophobic

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher Clapham (1993:124) made a good point in stating that the historical closeness of the North-Abyssinian plateau and the Eritrean lowlands "is no argument for the forcible incorporation into Ethiopia of people who want to form a separate state; and in any event, as the Somali tragedy shows, cultural affinity provides no guarantee of stable or even peaceful coexistence."

<sup>8</sup> It needs to be underlined that there had been - and still are - strong regional/ethnic identities such as those of Akkele-Guzay or Hamasen, Habab or Beni Amer, Kunama or Nara etc. long before the arrival of the Italians (and the same is true for Ethiopian peoples and regions).

refusal of diverging opinions, analyses and identities in a framework of artificial nationalism, which underestimates historical diversity.

In the following paragraphs, I will elaborate on the question what the role of two main Eritrean regions was in and outside Ethiopian history.

### **Dependence and independence of Eritrean regions**

The ideological character of the idea that Eritrea is a "natural" part of Ethiopia can already be demonstrated by a rough overview of the manifold developments of several regions and kingdoms of today's Eritrea and northern Ethiopia. Much of the Eritrean *lowlands* - linked with Sudanese kingdoms - had played a politically quite separate role long before the arrival of the Italian colonizers. The *central Eritrean highlands* (the Ethiopian kingdom of the *Bahri Negash*) and the rest of Ethiopia were linked with each other by a complex and ancient political structure, changing its character much over the centuries.

#### *a) The lowlands around Massawa (Ottoman Habeş)*

One of the cradles of Eritrean independence and historical identity are the lowlands of "Habeş", the Ottoman province of Massawa<sup>9</sup>. When Christian Ethiopia in the 16th century was weakened after a long struggle against the armies of *Imam Ahmad al-Ghazi* ("Grañ"), the ruler of the state of Adal, the coastal region was under no clear sovereignty. Ethiopia could not control it as it did sometimes before at times of greater power. Also the Dahlak Sultanate, which controlled Massawa at times, had perished in the first half of the 16th century<sup>10</sup>. That island sultanate was a center of Muslim

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<sup>9</sup> See on its history: Orhonlu (1974). - Until the early 20th c. the Ottoman Sultan called himself ruler of Habeş, thus expressing a claim over entire "Abyssinia" (etymologically meaning "Habesha", i.e. highlanders speaking Tigrinya or Amharic). Habeş was the name given to the province of Massawa, but originally meant the whole Ethiopian Empire. Old maps, however, show the historical reality by distinguishing between Habeş and Ethiopia: The coastal region is usually called "Costa di Abex" (= "Coast of Habeş" in Portuguese) until the 18th century, denominating it as a separate entity, apart from "Abyssinia" in the highlands. Still in the early 19th century, the *Allgemeine Encyclopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste* defined "Abex (Abech)" as a proper name of the coastal province (Ersch/Gruber 1818: Section I).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the Eritrean historian: Kurdi (1994). See the article on Dahlak (including detailed information on the independant sultanate) by Emeri van Donzel and Ronald E. Kon in Uhlig (2005: 64-69). - See also Ullendorf (1960:63) who says that the *Naib* of Hirgigo (near

civilisation in the golden ages of Islam. This was followed by a period of expansion by the Ottoman Empire, which laid hands on the Red Sea port of Massawa and on Dahlak in 1557, establishing a special political relationship with the Belew (a Beja coastal people), investing their chief as *Naib*<sup>11</sup>. His residence was Hirgigo near Massawa, from where he controlled the hinterlands (Pankhurst 1982:80-93, 233-246). In the 19th century, for example, the Habab acted virtually independently, but still accepted the *suzerainty* of the Ottoman, then Egyptian, then Italian Massawa governors. The Habab leader in 1865 paid homage to the first Egyptian governor of Massawa province, receiving more gifts from him than the Naib, who was still formally his overlord.<sup>12</sup> The port of Massawa stayed under the control of the Turks, who established relationships of vassalage with adjacent regions, sometimes including that of the Christian *Bahri Negash* in the highlands. Massawa had close political and economical links to the Muslim states of the region<sup>13</sup>.

The Egyptian government took over Massawa in 1865/66 and developed great ambitions to create a model province. Important cotton and tobacco plantations were set up, and in 1874 the province even took part in the Vienna World Exhibition in order to illustrate how economic exploitation and development could change an African region (Kaiser 1990). This period was marked by Egyptian expansion under governor Munzinger Pasha (locally called Messenjer, according to the letter of Atse Yohannes IV. to Kaiser Wilhelm I., 1883; Tafla 1981:207): In 1872 Bogos region with its main

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Massawa) „acknowledged his dependence upon the Prefect of the Sea“, a former title of the Dahlak sultan.

<sup>11</sup> "Deputy"; this title is held by the descendants of the first Naib up to today. Cf. d'Avray (1996: 4, 57, 59, 65f, 69, 83). His relationship to the *Bahri Negash* was often close, see details on this in: Pollera (1935:48).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. d'Avray, with Pankhurst (2000) for the report by the Italian colonial officer Cesare Hagg of June 19, 1887, on the gifts conferred by former suzerains to the Habab leader and the *Naib*.

<sup>13</sup> It is also due to this factual closeness that the Rashayda decided to cross the Red Sea from the Arabian peninsula and settle in the Massawa area starting from 1867. - It was also a center of international Muslim slave trade up to the 19th century: When the Swiss traveller Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, disguised as a Mecca pilgrim Sheikh Ibrahim, stayed in the region in 1814, slaves brought from the highlands were a highly appreciated "import article" to the Arabian peninsula (Burckhardt 1819). - In 1887, when the Habab signed their treaty with Italy, the officer in charge noted that the slave trade, being a major source of income of the Habab, should not be questioned. Cf. D'Avray, with Pankhurst (2000).



city Keren were occupied, and the Afar started to pay tribute. The expansion came to a halt in 1876 when several Egyptian military expeditions were defeated by Ethiopian armies. Thereafter Egypt, since 1882 under British suzerainty, disengaged itself from the region. For a short period Keren came under Ethiopian rule in 1884/85. Italy, having proclaimed a small "Colonia di Assab" in 1882 at the southern coast, entered into the power vacuum; Massawa was occupied by Italy in 1885 (Negash 1987); several military expeditions followed. In 1887 a treaty with the Habab who were under the suzerainty of the governors of Massawa was signed subjecting the Habab under Italian rule<sup>14</sup>.

I resume: The coastal region became the stepping stone for a first attempt of unifying a part of future Eritrea under Egyptian rule<sup>15</sup>. The newcomer Italy thereafter was at least partly successful to take over the loyalty of the coastal peoples towards Egypt, thus being able to use the separate status of Massawa as a basis for her colonial plans.

#### ***b) The highlands (the kingdom of the Bahri Negash)***

The second cradle of Eritrea - and in public discourse also of a modern nationalist identity - is the Christian kingdom of the *Bahri Negash*<sup>16</sup>. This region served as a bridge between Christian Ethiopia and the Muslim coast, which also contributed to its ambiguous character. It was in the anarchic period of the Zemene Mesafint in the 18th century that the old kingdom of the *Bahri Negash*, called Medri Bahri (in European sources also "Bahra"<sup>17</sup> or "Barnagassia"<sup>18</sup>), was struggling for a new role in Ethiopian politics, periodically assuming a high degree of autonomy from the crown, while it

<sup>14</sup> Cf. d'Avray, with Pankhurst (2000) for an English translation of the treaty.

<sup>15</sup> Even if exaggerated, it is this idea which made the Ethiopian sociologist Muse Tegegne (1992) describe Munzinger as the "founder of Eritrea".

<sup>16</sup> Which means "King of the [Red] Sea", even if he didn't rule the coastal area (but controlled the trade coming from the coast). This title underlines the Ethiopian claim to rule over the sea. The same pattern was used by the Ottomans, who called their province „Habeş“, thus claiming the whole highlands.

<sup>17</sup> An Abyssinian province, separate from the kingdom of "Tygre". Cf. the 17th c. Latin-German manuscript of Hiob Ludolf, Universitäts- und Stadtbibliothek Frankfurt/Main, "REGNUM ABISSINORUM, CHRISTIANORUM IN AFRICA, uulgo Presbyteri Johannis duplici errore dictum Calixtus desiderio Concordiæ Christiane. ..."; p. 211 (described in: Lehmann 1984: I-68f.)

<sup>18</sup> A latinized name for the kingdom of the *Bahri Negash*, cf. the great German encyclopaedia "Zedler's Universal-Lexicon" of 1733, describing it as a kingdom for its own.

remained a typical Christian Ethiopian kingdom. It is especially the relation the *Bahri Negash* had with the adjacent Ottoman province which demonstrates his particular role as a governor of a border region, whose importance lay in the fact that it was only through this kingdom that Massawa was connected with the highlands. In the 16th century *Bahri Negash* Yeshaq even defected from the Ethiopian crown and formed an alliance with the Turks under Özdemiş *Pasha*<sup>19</sup>, letting them build a mosque in Debarwa, his capital. The dynamics of the establishment of their new coastal province led the Turks into endless skirmishes with the Ethiopian kings; they occupied the Eritrean plateau in consent with the *Bahri Negash*, but were defeated in 1578. *Bahri Negash* Yeshaq was killed and Debarwa destroyed by the emperor. Thereafter, the Ottomans exercised their power in the lowland areas only. The *Bahri Negash* was marginalized, and its kingdom was ruled by governors from local dynasties<sup>20</sup>.

In the second half of the 19th century emperor Yohannes IV submitted the Eritrean central highlands under governors appointed by him, replacing the old local dynasties and reducing autonomy and land-rights. For many years, the central Eritrean highlands, called „Mereb-Mellash“, were governed by the Tigrayan appointee *Ras* Alula, the emperor's brother-in-law. Under Menelik, however, these highlands were lost to Italy. The Italians had taken over the Egyptian province of the Red Sea in 1885, and in 1889 occupied the highlands. An important reason for this lay in the political situation of northern Ethiopia after the death of *Atse* Yohannes IV. The provinces of greater Tigray were rebellious after the Showan *Negus* Menelik became the successor of the Tigrayan *Atse* Yohannes. For some of their leaders it seemed more promising to collaborate with the Italians than with Menelik, who would not allow Tigray to occupy the central power. This was one of the reasons why Italy could so easily advance into the Mereb-Mellash. In addition to that, Menelik himself was interested to allow the Italians to take

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Pankhurst (1982: 65-72).

<sup>20</sup> Later on there were several *Bahri Negash* simultaneously, no one of them exercising real power; subsequently, the *Deggayat* lineage of Hazzega took over control over much of central Eritrea. - The politics of the mighty Tigrayan prince Michael Sihul, who allegedly started his career as a general of *Bahri Negash* Solomun in the mid-18th century (Killion 1998:411), later the most powerful prince of Ethiopia, exploited, however, internal rivalries of the house of Hazzega, which assured that Tigrayan governors would enjoy priority within the Ethiopian power structures.

over these regions<sup>21</sup>. He did not only acquire new Christian neighbors, with whose help he hoped to get into much closer contact with Europe and, consequently, to get access to modern weaponry, but he also weakened the Tigrayan leaders through the partition of their provinces. When the local leaders understood that they would not gain any power from supporting the Italians it was already too late. Their defection already had helped both the Italians and Menelik II to stabilize their respective reigns.

*c) Ancient Ethiopian concepts of „regional international law“*

History traditionally serves as a source of juridical claims. A closer look into the Ethiopian perception of the Eritrean highlands clarifies a lot. In the middle of the 19th century the imperial idea of a unified Ethiopia reigning over the Christian world of the South saw a great revival under the emperors Tewodros II and Yohannes IV. Tewodros even dreamed of liberating Jerusalem from Muslim domination with the help of the Christian kingdoms of the North, which shows how deeply he was inspired by the mythical traditions of the Ethiopian state - a claim of Christianity to rule the world, which at least meant priority of Ethiopia over all its neighbors by will of God. The correspondence between *Atse* Yohannes and the German Kaiser Wilhelm I demonstrates how the Empire defined itself through ancient claims which were believed to be valid forever. There are two interesting aspects: While defining the borders of Ethiopia in 1881<sup>22</sup>, Yohannes lists territories which had been lost especially in the North and the West, but were "belonging to Ethiopia". Here he follows a vision of an eternal Ethiopia with un-alienable borders, a pattern which is revived today by Ethiopian nationalist discourse.

In his text he *Atse*Yohannes lists peoples and regions, which were not under his rule, but should be:

Bori [the peninsula, formally a petty Afar kingdom], Assawerta [the Saho people of the Zula Bay], Zula, Asägde [the tigre-people Asgäde], Bäqla [Rora Bäqla in the northern extensions of the highlands, with a Tigre-speaking population], Ad Häbtä Maryam [Tigre-speakers who call themselves Ad Tämäryam], Barya qäyyih, Barya tsällim [meaning the Marea qäyyih and the

<sup>21</sup> Ullendorff (1960:92) mentions it: "Menelik was happy to leave the Italians a free hand in the Massawa-Asmara-Keren region, where they would relieve him of having to deal with his northern adversaries".

<sup>22</sup> He says: "Its limits to the east and south are the sea", cf. Tafla (1981:201).

Marea tsällim, a people living in the now northern part of Eritrea], Ad Wälättä Maryam, Hälhāl Mogäs [Halhal Bogos, i.e. the Blin, with their main city Kärän], Tander, Hbub [this certainly means the Tigre-speaking Habab], Mänsa' [a neighboring Tigre-speaking group], Bidäl, Chätäl, Guhmät, Dume, Dähmila [the `Afar group Dahimela], Shäho [the Saho in Akkälä-Guzay in the Eritrean highlands], Wäyta, Takuy, Ennarya [an Oromo kingdom in the south - in this case, however, probably mistakingly designating the Nara, neighbors of Tigre-groups and of the Kunama], Häbab [appearing a second time], Kunama Bazen [a Nilo-Saharan-speaking group in the southwestern Eritrean lowlands], Galla Bet [Gallabat, a Sudanese province in the west], Gädarif [another Sudanese province neighboring Gallabat], Härar [an independant Muslim emirate in the east of Ethiopia]. (Tafla 1981:200)

Many of these peoples and regions had not been under Ethiopian rule since centuries. Some as the Kunama (also called "Bazen"<sup>23</sup>) in southwestern Eritrea had regularly been victims of raids both of highland Abyssinians and of Beja tribes from the Sudan, while no effective authority was established over them<sup>24</sup>. In his letter, *Atse* Yohannes also claims the then Egyptian port of Massawa, the Bäläw, the cities of Khartoum and Suakim etc., hence, areas and cities outside his sovereignty, but which had all been part of the ancient Aksumite Empire at least for a short period. "Restore the lands which I have listed as mine." (Tafla 1981:203)<sup>25</sup> Yohannes's claims were a part of a larger imperial mind-set and part of the dynamics of rebuilding Ethiopia, and express essential ideas even of today's Ethiopian nationalism. For me two aspects are of interest, a theoretical and a practical one:

1) His list shows a specific conception of regional international law. Territories which had once been Ethiopian are Ethiopian and stay Ethiopian, be it that they had been lost after the fall of the Aksumite Empire

<sup>23</sup> This is why in old maps of the region we find a „Bazen Country“. NB: The border between 19<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopia and the Bazen is at approximately the same place still today; it is the nowadays' Badme border.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. in detail Munzinger (1864).

<sup>25</sup> The German envoy to Abyssinia, Dr. Gerhard Rohlfs, was positive towards Yohannes's claims: „he expressed his view articulately that Ethiopia had suffered injustice at the hands of the Egyptians and the European adventurers, that the Emperor was misunderstood by Europe, that the country was capable of accepting modernization, but that she had to have a port in order to survive as an independent state.“ (Tafla 1981:88). See also Rohlfs (1883). – The Kaiser, however, did not oppose the overtaking of Massawa by Italy in 1885, following political interests (cf. Tafla 1981:89).

after the 8th century, or after the great wars of *Imam* Ahmad of Adal in the 16th century<sup>26</sup>, or much more recently - it makes no difference. The idea of historical change is thus not accepted or acceptable: The change of political supremacy on territories is unlawful - eternally. This idea shows a profoundly impregnated concept of a mythical empire. Ethiopia, selected by God, could not lose her territories. Even if destroyed by historical events it will and must revive. This conviction contradicts two modern ideas: a) That no state, even no cultural identity is for ever *stable*. b) That new identities and loyalties may be created and rightfully and *legitimately* replace the old ones.

2) Furthermore this text also shows which territories were indeed under Ethiopian control. Yohannes IV thoroughly listed all the territories, peoples and provinces which he did not control. A great number of old maps and reports of travellers, songs and stories of the local people confirm his list. Many of these territories are still outside Ethiopia, but belong to Sudan or to Eritrea. To express these observations with a modern idea: Being *claimed* by Ethiopia does not mean being *part of* Ethiopia.

Even if Yohannes IV was relying on a very traditional concept of Empire, he was also a precursor of modern nationalism: The irredentist approach of Yohannes IV shows him also as a modern figure of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a period of nation-building, inspired by imperial ideologies and concepts of national unification. His claims could have been acceptable for European powers of his time<sup>27</sup>. Yohannes's vision strongly resembles national visions of unification still found today. In contemporary international law, however, the new notion of self-determination relies on the idea that not only a state or a dynasty might have rights and claims over territories and people, but also – or: above all - the people, who have a right to choose their destiny.

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<sup>26</sup> In the beginning of his letter Yohannes describes his conflicts with "the Turks" [as he called the Egyptians]. He concludes: "And now, if you intend to mediate between us, I agree on condition [that I get] the country as it was at the hands of my fathers, the Emperors of Ethiopia, before Mahamad Grañ devastated it, and the state disintegrated." (Translation of Tafla 1981:201)

<sup>27</sup> After the defeat of the Italians in the battle of Adwa in 1896 his successor Menelik II signed treaties with colonial powers who recognized his sovereignty over Southern regions which he even still did not control effectively, in a sense thus taking part himself in the partition of the Horn of Africa.

Eritrean nationalism is built on this concept, which embraces the idea of historical change: From this point of view, the new state of Eritrea cannot be delegitimized by claims of historical unity. However, the right to choose their own government, which is meant by the right of self-determination, is overwhelmed by an ideology of "Eritreanism", in which the government which was formed by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front is considered the final fulfilment of Eritrea's quest for liberty. An almost religiously colored nationalism takes over the idea of any right of self-determination through the freedom of speech, political pluralism, or free exchange of information.

### **Conclusion**

Until now both concepts – eternal Ethiopia versus self-determination of Eritrea –, xenophobic reactions of leading politicians and intellectuals in Ethiopia and Eritrea towards each other and the contradictory tendency towards forced "unification" have made a clear understanding of each other's claims and identities difficult. Nationalist discourse in Ethiopia does not acknowledge the existence of otherness, instead an eternalistic unitarian ideology dominates. This is, understandably, rejected by the other. This rejection of the idea of being brothers and "being one" again provokes xenophobia: In Ethiopian nationalist discourse the idea that Eritreans belong to Ethiopia is often linked with ideas of submission and war against these unruly people. Xenophobia replaces, paradoxically, the previous idea of absolute and eternal unity.

To summarize, in Ethiopia, nationalism found two contradicting expressions: Pan-Ethiopianism, which claimed Eritrea to belong to Ethiopia, and xenophobic rejection of Eritrea as a sort of eternal trouble-maker<sup>28</sup>. Imagined shared history, which does not recognize pluralistic historical realities, once includes, once rejects Eritrea. The rejection, however, is generally linked with the idea of Eritreans being "defectors", deserving the treatment of traitors. Ethiopian nationalism in this form is unable to recognize Eritrea as a nation.

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<sup>28</sup> Just to mention one event which is linked with this perspective: In the beginning of the war, in 1998, tens of thousands of Eritreans and persons of Eritrean origin were expelled from Ethiopia within a few weeks only. This was followed later in the course of the war by expulsions of Ethiopians from Eritrea (1999/2000). - In that period, both in Ethiopian and Eritrean discourse one could suddenly encounter strong claims that "the other" belonged to a "different race".

On the other hand, in Eritrea the xenophobic rejection of Ethiopia tends to become a constitutive part of Eritrean nationalism. One tendency within Eritrean nationalism imagines an eternal "separated" history, therefore is based itself on a xenophobic concept, in which a modern border is essentialized, thus using a similar pattern as found in Ethiopia, which is likewise essentialised. Another tendency rejects "eternal" Ethiopia and claims that the historical process itself creates legitimacy.

The aim of this paper was twofold: to review the historical arguments used in Eritrea and Ethiopia for either unity or difference and to show their politically instrumental and manipulative character on both sides.

One rather *positive* conclusion can be deduced: The study of history shows that a present situation (such as the independence of Eritrea) was regularly prepared by factors enrooted back in history, thus calling upon all kinds of stake-holders and observers to be more attentive towards details, the manifold sides of the development of states, and not to fall into the trap of nationalistic over-simplifications. As identity is actually formed by the complex history of regions, peoples, families, the understanding of these different „histories“ can lead to a better understanding of each other and consequently to more tolerance. A second consequence might sound rather *negative* to some: history cannot provide reasons for actual claims. Yet discovering the ideological nature of claims, such as Yohannes's, which recalls principles of today's nationalism, could help to overcome this kind of historical debate. Historical claims are always and only used following *present* political or ideological interests or necessities. Research shows that no historical claim is absolutely justified - and never important enough to enjoy priority over the needs of the present.

A nationalistic perspective of an "eternal" Ethiopia makes it impossible to recognize the right of "others" to different and sometimes conflicting concepts and policies, and to find institutionalised ways to discuss solutions to disputes. Likewise, the nationalist idea of Eritrea being essentially different and separated makes any communication across the border impossible - as any link is paranoically seen as dangerous and reminding of previous submission. What might be the way out of this? Change can only be achieved when ideas are freely exchanged and when history is abandoned as a key-argument in political struggles. This is an almost trivial assertion, but nevertheless an important one. Without creating an atmosphere of mutual respect, the present cold war, which has enrooted

itself even in the minds of the Ethiopian and Eritrean scholarly community, will not stop even when peace becomes possible politically. To summarize both ideas: History is not to decide on our *future*, but it helps to understand *why we are now what we are*.

### **Abstract**

Im äthiopisch-eriträischen Konflikt spielen historische Bezugnahmen eine bedeutende Rolle. Beide Konfliktparteien beziehen sich auf Geschichte, um ihre gegensätzlichen politischen Zielvorstellungen – eriträische Unabhängigkeit auf der einen Seite, die Idee einer Einheit mit Äthiopien auf der anderen – damit zu unterstützen. In seiner Diskussion historischer Quellen zu dieser Region zeigt der vorliegende Artikel zweierlei klar auf: die Relevanz, welche der Geschichte als Mittel zur Bestätigung politischer Ansprüche von beiden Konfliktseiten zugemessen wird, sowie deren beständig missbräuchlicher Umgang mit historischen Fakten. Es wird argumentiert, es sei höchst an der Zeit, historische Argumente aus den erhitzten Debatten des politischen Raums zu bannen und sie in den Bereich der eigentlichen Geschichtsschreibung zu reintegrieren.

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Illustration: Ethiopia as it was in around 1885; detail of a historical map