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## History and conflict in Africa: the experience of Ethiopia-Eritrea and Rwanda\*

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Africa rarely fails to grip world attention, and mostly in a negative manner. If it is not war, it is famine. If it is not famine, it is Aids. Some years back, *The Economist*, which has rarely had kind words for this hapless continent of ours, went to the extent of dubbing it the hopeless continent. While such a characterization helps little either to understand the problem or to resolve it, it nonetheless underpins the dismal record Africa has shown in the 1990s. Other than the dismantling of apartheid, it is difficult to think of any major positive development. It took practically the whole decade for Liberia to extricate itself from the political quagmire it had landed in. Sierra Leone was still in the midst of turmoil. In the heart of the continent, the Republic of Congo became a battleground for many contending forces, both internal and external. Outside Sub-Saharan Africa, in Algeria, thousands of civilians met their death in rather gruesome fashion.

Two events that gripped international public attention in such negative fashion were the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda and the Ethio-Eritrean conflict that exploded in 1998 and raged on for two more years. The magnitude of the disasters is far from comparable. About three-quarters of a million Rwandans are believed to have perished in the first. The death toll in the second seems unlikely to exceed one hundred thousand, though the statistics tend to be wildly divergent in this case. Moreover, the Rwandan case is clearly one of internal conflict. The Ethio-Eritrean war on the other hand evolved as an inter-state conflict by virtue of the independent status that

\*This paper was first presented at the Africa Day Seminar of the Norwegian University of Science & Technology, Trondheim, on 18 August 2000. An updated version was subsequently presented at the memorial workshop in honour of the late Professor Merid Wolde Aregay in July 2009.

Eritrea came to assume in 1993. In the longer historical perspective, though, it was perceived differently, the Ethiopians regarding it as an internal administrative problem or at most a civil war and the forces that fought for Eritrean independence depicting it as an anti-colonial struggle.

Nonetheless, despite the above obvious differences, the two conflicts highlighted, if admittedly in differing degree, the role and relevance of history. In the first place, both conflicts have deep historical roots. Secondly, history, as much as politics, was a contentious issue, nay a battleground. The interpretation and re-interpretation of the past came to assume central place in promoting the cause of this or the other party. In the Ethio-Eritrean case, this pre-occupation with history bordered on obsession, obfuscating the more fundamental and ultimately decisive issues of political power and economic interest.

This brief presentation is intended to address the central theme of history and conflict as reflected in the two African experiences. In the first part, the historical roots of both conflicts are highlighted. In the second part, the issue of how the past became a bone of contention is discussed. Some of my historical interpretation of the Ethio-Eritrean conflict may sound biased towards the former party and against the latter. Similarly, a bias may be detected towards the Tutsi rather than the Hutu rendition of the Rwandan past. I would like to believe that this is more a reflection of the status of professional historiography than my own personal predilection.

## THE HISTORICAL ROOTS

### *The Case of Rwanda*

For those with a short historical memory, the 1994 genocide was a cataclysm of biblical proportions. But, like all such major social catastrophes, the genocide had both short-term and long-term historical origins. And it is generally the short-term historical factors that are readily visible. Foremost among these short-term factors was the launching in October 1990 of the military invasion from Uganda by the forces of the Tutsi-dominated Revolutionary Patriotic Front (RPF). The threat that this represented to Hutu hegemony precipitated the rise of an extremist wing amongst the dominant Hutu that worked almost systematically towards the final reckoning.

Moreover, the economic crisis of the late 1980s, induced by the stresses of SAP and the fall in the international market price of coffee on which the country's economy was heavily dependent, accentuated the enduring battle for scarce resources. Finally, the experiment in democratization ironically accelerated the countdown to genocide in two significant ways: in posing a serious threat to the political hegemony of the dominant Hutu clique, the *Akazu*, and fostering the media of hate, most notably the nefarious Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLNC).

But, in the longer durée, these factors were mere catalysts that helped to ignite an already explosive situation. One has to delve deeper into the Rwandan past to identify the root causes of the genocide. And in that respect, one can at least identify the following four major factors: the ossification of ethnic identity, the battle for scarce resources, the refugee factor and the pervasive authoritarian political culture. We shall now look at each of these in some detail.

Historians of pre-colonial Rwanda are more or less in agreement that the three major groups – Hutu, Tutsi and Twa – denoted class or occupational categories rather than ethnic identification. The three groups shared a common language, *Kinyarwanda*, a common religion, the *Kubandwa* cult, and a common national identity, *banyarwanda* (“being Rwandan”). The two major groups, Hutu and Tutsi, who lived intermingled and intermarried, were united in their common despising of the Twa.

A divergent thesis is maintained by Hutu historians, who consider the groups to have been ethnic categories all along. The general view, however, is that it was under Belgian colonial rule that these terms came to have the connotation of rigid ethnic categories. The rigidity was consecrated with the introduction of ethnic ID cards, an innovation that was to have lethal consequences in the course of the genocide.

While it lasted, the Tutsi minority, which was idolized by the colonial order as a superior race, was quite content with this classification as it gave it special status and privileges. The situation was dramatically reversed in 1959, when the so-called “Hutu Revolution” gave the Hutu majority political ascendancy. Not only did class distinctions become ethnicized in Rwanda, but there was a degree of ethnic polarization uncommon in the rest of Africa – the Hutu battled it out with the Tutsi, with the numerically

and socially insignificant Twa being more or less relegated to observer status.

Secondly, Rwanda was one of the smallest countries in Africa and yet had a reputation for the largest density of population. These constraints induced intensive cultivation as well as intense competition for resources. The economic crisis of the late 1980s, which rendered from a quarter to half of the population landless, exacerbated this situation. While the genocidaires killed for a host of different reasons, many of them did so lured by the prospect of taking over the land of the victims. This land-grabbing assumed a bizarre dimension when Hutu started dubbing fellow Hutu Tutsi in order to eliminate them and appropriate their share of the loot.

Thirdly, the genocide was ultimately the result of the unresolved problem of Tutsi refugees. Since the establishment of Hutu ascendancy in 1959, thousands and tens of thousands of Rwandan Tutsi had fled their country and sought refuge mostly in neighbouring countries but also further afield. The total number of these refugees has come to be estimated at 600,000 to 700,000 by 1990. Successive Rwandan regimes were adamant in their opposition to the repatriation of these refugees. Of these refugees, the ones in Uganda (numbering around 70,000 by 1970) were specially well-placed to execute the only option left, i.e. return to their country by force. Their participation in the National Resistance Army led by Yoweri Museveni had given them both military skills and equipment. The constraints that they began to face in the late 1980s within the Ugandan military structure directly led to the RPF invasion of Rwanda in October 1990, which in turn triggered a series of events that culminated in the genocide – the flight of Hutu from RPF-occupied territories, the rise of the extremist Hutu Power, what could be described as an RPF diplomatic victory at Arusha, and the downing of the presidential plane on April 6, 1994, which sparked off the genocide.

Finally, although this was not entirely unique to the country, Rwandan political culture was characterized by a heavy dosage of authoritarianism. There was a linear progression on the authoritarian scale from the absolute monarchy of the *mwami* (as the Rwandan king was known), the even more un-attenuated authoritarianism of Belgian colonial rule, and the two somewhat puritanically autocratic post-independence republics, led suc-

cessively by Grégoire Kayibanda (1961-1973) and Juvénal Habyarimana (1973-1994). This authoritarian tradition had the dual effect of making the state the dispenser of all posts and privileges and of fostering a tradition of blind obedience to the wielders of political authority. That blind obedience explains the phenomenal speed with which the genocide was executed and the ease with which the *Interahamwe*, protagonists of the genocidal act, could transplant their administrative machinery to the refugee camps in Zaire.

*The Case of Ethiopia and Eritrea*

On the surface, the Ethio-Eritrean conflict, which suddenly hit the headlines in May 1998, was around a boundary dispute. The solution that was eventually sought for it also had the resolution of the undemarcated boundary as its principal concern. But it does not require much imagination to figure out that there were more deep-rooted political and economic issues behind the apparent border dispute. It is when viewed in a longer historical perspective that one can better appreciate the problem, although admittedly the two sides do not have an identical interpretation of the past. We will address that problem below. Let us first present in outline form the generally accepted version of historical evolution in the region.

As in the Rwandan case, the colonial intervention played a decisive role in sowing the seeds for future conflict. In this case, the colonial power was Italy, which started carving out its colony of Eritrea in 1890. Before that time, highland Eritrea (consisting of the three provinces of Hamasien, Saraye and Akkala-Guzay and generically referred to as the “Kabasa”) had a common history – including a common religion and a common political culture – with what then constituted Ethiopia. To use a convenient, if sometimes abused, term, it was part of the “Abyssinian” civilization. The links, which extended to the use of a common language (Tegreñña), were even stronger with the kindred people of Tegray to the south of the Marab River, the colonial boundary. As a matter of fact, the term Tegré had evolved as a geographical category denoting both present-day Tegray and the Kabasa.

This unity was perhaps at its highest in the ancient kingdom of Aksum (spanning roughly the first eight centuries AD). In what is generally

known as the medieval period (1270-1527), much of the Kabasa was administered by the Bahr Nagash, an official directly responsible to the Ethiopian emperor, while Tegray was similarly administered by an official known as the Tegre Makonnen. After the collapse of the medieval kingdom in the sixteenth century, the northern provinces tended to have a relatively more independent existence until the restoration of imperial power in the second half of the nineteenth century. As far as the Kabasa is concerned, this resurgence of imperial power reached its peak during the reign of Emperor Yohannes IV (r. 1872-1889), who appointed one of his most trusted generals, Ras Alula, as governor of what was then referred to as Marab-Mellash (more or less present-day Eritrea).

Italian colonial rule severed these links and established Eritrea as a separate geographical entity. Subsequent to the death of Yohannes, with the shift of Ethiopia's political centre to the south, Shawa, Tegray was marginalized vis-à-vis Ethiopia and reduced to subordinate status vis-à-vis Eritrea. Eritreans, who themselves were clearly made to feel their subservience to the colonial master, in turn came to acquire a sense of superiority over their former senior kindred to the south. By virtue of the fact that a number of Tegrays were forced to seek menial employment in Italian-ruled Eritrea, they came to bear the brunt of Kabasa arrogance. The term *Agame*, which initially had referred only to the inhabitants of northeastern Tegray, became a generic and clearly pejorative appellation for Tegrays.

Yet, it is perhaps a mark of the resilience of pan-Ethiopian sentiments that, when the Italian colonial rulers were driven out in 1941 and the fate of Eritrea hang in the balance, a substantial proportion of Kabasa Eritreans, rallying behind the Unionist Party, favoured union with Ethiopia. A variation on this expression of trans-Marab loyalties was advocated by the Liberal Progressive Party, one of the separatist parties that was active in Akkala-Guzay in south-eastern Eritrea, an area historically very closely associated with *Agame* in Tegray; that party first called for a union of Eritrea and Tegray and subsequently for conditional union with Ethiopia (i.e. in the form of a federation). Outright independence for the former Italian colony was demanded only by the forces (like the Muslim League) representing the predominantly Muslim lowlands, which did not have much in common with historic Ethiopia anyway.

The short-lived UN-sponsored federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia (1952-1961) was supposed to be a compromise solution. The EPLF version of the wrecking of the federation has put the blame squarely on the Hayla-Sellase regime. More carefully documented recent studies have shown the central role played by the Unionists in terminating the federation. Whoever the culprit, that fateful act ushered in a period of warfare as successive Ethiopian regimes sought to retain Eritrea by force of arms and the Eritrean fronts struggled for independence at all costs. The bloody confrontation seemed to have come to a merciful end in 1991 and to have formally ended with the independence of Eritrea in 1993. But, as if there were some kind of curse on the region, war erupted once again in 1998 in new and even more lethal form.

Ironically, this new chapter of warfare, which is unprecedented in its virulence and intensity, is being led by two former allies, the EPLF and the TPLF/EPRDF. But the irony is superficial. Not only has Italian colonial rule exacerbated old antagonisms and engendered new antipathies, but the two fronts have quarrelled as much as they had cooperated in the course of their armed struggle against the regime in Addis Ababa. Ideological and strategic differences were only shelved aside temporarily in the late 1980s, when the two fronts waged a concerted and ultimately successful struggle to topple the Mengistu regime.

#### *Salient Features*

At least three things emerge prominently from this historical outline of the two conflict areas: the decisive colonial intervention, the vexed question of identity, and the potency of economic forces in the genesis of conflicts. As in Rwanda, colonial rule in Eritrea set the framework for future relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The only difference was that whereas in Rwanda colonialism defined the relations between two groups - Hutu and Tutsi - within the same country, in north-east Africa it forced the creation of two geographically distinct categories. In Rwanda, the end of colonial rule was accompanied by the establishment of Hutu hegemony. In Ethiopia and Eritrea, it took about a decade of domestic struggle and feverish international activity to sort out the transition. The federal experiment of the 1950s, which in retrospect was the least objectionable arrangement



under the circumstances, proved short-lived. It gave way to a thirty-year confrontation between the forces of total absorption and those of total independence - a confrontation that appeared to have been resolved finally with the independence of Eritrea in 1993.

Nor did this external factor cease with the end of colonial rule. Foreign donors sponsored and patronized the Hutu demographic dictatorship. In the countdown to genocide, France played a nefarious role not only of supporting the Habyarimana regime but also bailing out the genocidaires. In the face of the impending and unfolding genocide that august body, the UN, pressurized by the US, opted for inaction as the best policy. In the Ethio-Eritrean case, the powers (first the US and then the Soviet Union) stood behind the Ethiopian state in its war against the Eritrean liberation fronts. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which spearheaded the struggle for independence, relied on Arab support and Western public sympathy for its part. In the 1998-2000 war, external actors, be it unilaterally or collectively, were interested more in putting an end to what was universally dubbed a "senseless war" rather than coming over to one side or the other.

The question of identity has been at the center of both conflicts, the Rwandan and the Ethio-Eritrean one. In the former, a loose and occupational category was rigidified into water-tight ethnic compartments under Belgian colonial rule. The ethnic ID card came to define permanently a person's ethnic affiliation. Even then, there were cases both before and during the genocide when Tutsi contrived to pass for Hutu - to gain privileges or to save their lives - and Hutu were stigmatized as Tutsi - to strip them of their loot during the genocide.

But identity has been at its most fluid in the Ethio-Eritrean case. Before Italian colonial rule, highland Eritreans readily identified with their kin to the south. The end of that rule found Eritreans divided into two main camps - those who sought unconditional union with Ethiopia under the slogan of "Ethiopia or Death" and those who campaigned for unconditional independence, with a minor group in between opting for conditional union. During the thirty years' war (1961-1991), many Eritreans found themselves torn between the Ethiopian identity that they had either inherited from their parents or had been imposed on them by the Ethiopian state and

the new Eritrean identity being forged by the liberation forces. Many observers feel convinced that the war was probably more decisive than colonial rule in forging this Eritrean identity.

Yet, even after the EPLF victory in 1991 and the 1993 referendum that formalized Eritrean independence, the issue of identity was far from resolved, especially for the many hundreds of thousands of Eritreans residing in Ethiopia. When the new round of war began in 1998, however, that same referendum was interpreted by the Ethiopian state to define Eritrean citizenship. As a result, many Eritreans who either considered themselves Ethiopian or felt more at home in Ethiopia were forcibly evicted. This act of the Ethiopian state, as well as in general the unprecedented polarization engendered by the post-1998 conflict, succeeded even more than the thirty years' war in defining sharply who is Eritrean and who is Ethiopian. It is one of the ironies with which history abounds that such polarization and unremitting hatred has come about at a time when the two states were led by groups who had a common past and a common identity *vis-à-vis* other groups in Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Finally, the struggle for economic resources has been at the root of both conflicts. In the Rwandan case, the struggle over land in a congested country has often assumed elemental dimensions. The Hutu were adamantly opposed to the return of Tutsi refugees after 1961 because they feared they would reclaim what had been taken away from them. As the genocide was running its course Hutu officials were busy registering lands of executed Tutsi for re-distribution among the Hutu.

In the Ethio-Eritrean case, the Italian rulers of Eritrea had known all along that Eritrea was not economically viable without Ethiopia. Hence their two major efforts to integrate them, the first disastrously (1896) and the second with comparative success (1936-1941). After 1991, the EPLF, while cherishing the independence for which so many Eritreans had sacrificed their lives, sought at the same time an economic partnership with Ethiopia clearly weighted in its favour. The EPRDF leadership in Ethiopia, though ready to humour this attitude at the initial stage, ultimately found it antithetical to its own plans for economic hegemony in the country. The famous currency controversy (*Naqfa* vs. *Berr*) finally brought this simmering controversy to the boil.

## HISTORY AS A BATTLEGROUNDS

The historian's profession is a rather contentious one. This is particularly so in situations of conflict where each party has its own version of the past. The historian who finds himself at variance with one party's historical interpretation is readily accused of being an apologist for the other. The historian would like to believe that, even though his discipline does not have the finality and tightness of the natural sciences, there are nonetheless standard ways of arriving at historical truth. But politicians are unhappy with historical interpretations unless they confirm and reinforce their political stands. This is what has made history a political battleground.

Thus, not only do the two conflicts under consideration had deep historical roots but that very history was viewed divergently by contending parties. In the Rwandan case, the Tutsi not only viewed ethnicity as the invention of Belgian colonialism, but they - particularly the RPF - also extended this to deny the contemporary relevance of ethnic identity. Conversely, the Hutu emphasized the primordial significance of ethnic affiliation. The racist theories of the colonial era, which had portrayed the Tutsi as a superior race that had come from outside Rwanda and established its hegemony over the Hutu, was turned round against the Tutsi to deny them any quarter in Rwanda. Hence the refusal of successive Rwandan regimes to consider the repatriation of Tutsi refugees. And the genocide was supposed to provide the final solution to these obnoxious intruders.

But it is in the Ethio-Eritrean case that history was at its most contentious. The EPLF and its sympathizers in effect created an alternative history of Ethiopia and Eritrea. In the process, heroes have become villains and vice versa. While the standard rendering of history has been outlined above, let us now turn to see some of the prominent assertions of this alternative history.

The first contention was that Eritrea had a separate and independent history of its own even prior to its creation by Italian colonialism in 1890. This in effect meant either partitioning common achievements or appropriating them. Thus Ethiopian victories against Egyptians (1875 & 1876) and Italians (1887) on Eritrean soil became Eritrean victories. Ras Alula, the redoubtable general of continental stature who featured prominently in all,

became the villainous oppressor of Eritreans. Incidentally, one of the first acts of the EPLF after independence was to destroy the monument erected to mark Alula's victory over the Italians at Dogali in 1887.

The second contention was that, at the end of Italian colonial rule in 1941, Eritreans were overwhelmingly for independence. The Unionist movement, which advocated unconditional union with Ethiopia, was either completely ignored or portrayed as an orchestration of the Ethiopian government. The federation formula proposed by the United Nations was viewed as the result of the machinations of the big powers, who found it in their strategic and economic interest to appease Ethiopia, against the manifest wish of the Eritrean population.

As a result, EPLF and pro-EPLF historiography contended, Italian colonialism was succeeded by Ethiopian colonialism, with the British interim administration (1941-1952) forming a brief respite. The implications of this contention became quite obvious as the Eritrean liberation struggle picked pace. If the Eritrean struggle were against continued colonial rule, then the only logical solution would be independence, as had happened elsewhere in colonial Africa. Thus, although the EPLF briefly toyed with the idea of a referendum that would give Eritreans the options of independence, federation or union, this was abandoned in 1993 for the strait-jacket of independence versus the status quo.

Another strand of historical interpretation that came to have direct relevance in the 1998-2000 conflict came to portray Eritreans as rather special and invincible *vis-à-vis* Ethiopians. The first was attributed to the sophistication and urbane-ness that they had come to acquire under Italian colonial rule. The second was derived from the successful termination of their 30-year struggle with victory over the largest army in sub-Saharan Africa. Although they have been chided for their exuberance over having taken so long to achieve their objective, this image of invincibility was cardinal to both the EPLF and its admirers and explains the bravado with which it once again entered the fray in 1998.

## CONCLUSION

What can we conclude from the above points? First is the rather obvious point that conflicts such as the ones briefly discussed here almost in-

variably have deep historical roots. The historical discipline can help us to identify the different strands that contributed to these contemporary phenomena. Yet, that history is by no means undisputed. While rulers, particularly of poor and conflict-ridden countries, are prepared to be nonchalant about other disciplines, they tend to have a jealous fixation on history. The findings of a historian, honestly and conscientiously arrived at, are discarded as either fallacious or self-serving if they do not conform to a certain political norm or agenda. Conversely, history can be and has been invented.

In the end, though, this fixation on history of the political elite is tantamount to avoiding the real issues, which are economic in content and political in resolution. It is when the elite turns to address these real issues that meaningful steps could be taken towards the resolution of conflicts. History, politicians are fond of saying, is far too serious a business to be left to historians. With the benefit of hindsight, one can correct that rather presumptuous statement to read that the world would probably be a better place if history is left to historians, whatever the imperfections of their discipline.

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