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OLD PROBLEMS IN NEW CONFLICTS: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON ERITREA AND ITS RELATIONS WITH TIGRAY, FROM LIBERATION STRUGGLE TO INTER-STATE WAR

Richard Reid

AN OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUES

There can be few more sensitive or emotive subject-matters in the field of African studies today than the attempt to explore relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia in general, and between Eritrea and Tigray, in northern Ethiopia, in particular (Reid, forthcoming). Temperatures rise and tempers fray; accusation and counter-accusation fly with as much impunity as the academic arena can tolerate, which is actually a substantial amount; the term 'heated debate' is something of a polite understatement in a field where the search for 'objectivity' is as apparently fruitless as it is held to be in other areas of intense conflict between proverbial bad neighbours or presumed 'family members', as in Rwanda, Northern Ireland or Israel–Palestine. Virtually everyone who has written on Eritrea–Ethiopia laments the lack of objectivity in the field, usually only to find themselves accused (sometimes with justification, sometimes less so) of the very same failing. One is either a 'greater Ethiopianist', bitterly opposed to the aggressive, militaristic independence which Eritrea had the temerity to achieve, or an 'Eritrean nationalist', bitterly opposed to the aggressive expansionism of the Ethiopian empire-state. It is an apparently infinite debate characterised by polarisation, a discourse which has, at its very core, the old notion that 'if you are not with us, you are against us'. The intellectual and literary battlelines are as clearly drawn as any physical confrontation witnessed by the region at any time over the past two or more generations. An unwavering adherence to the formula 'if you are not with us, you are against us' has served many of the protagonists discussed in this paper very well in the crucible of armed struggle, survival in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds; it is less edifying in the context of informed, scientific discussion and, actually, in the end achieves nothing.

The purpose of this brief prelude is not to herald a piece of unprecedented objectivity, as someone, somewhere, will regard it as partisan, whether in overall approach and argument, or simply in a turn of phrase here and arrangement of words there. Academic 'polar bears'

RICHARD REID was Assistant Professor of History at the University of Asmara, Eritrea, from 1997 to 2002 and now teaches at the University of Durham. His work on the pre-colonial history of the Great Lakes region developed into a book, *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda* (James Currey 2002). He is currently working on the history of warfare in eastern and north-eastern Africa.

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are a hypersensitive, prickly species, relentlessly scouring the scholarly horizons for threats real or perceived, notoriously easily affronted by language and its structure. While we must, of course, aspire to objectivity—it would be irresponsible, at the very least, not to—there seems little point in actually claiming it publicly, as this simply means making a straw man of yourself before others do it for you. The purpose of this prelude is, however, to make less aware readers conscious of the bloody nature of this debate, as well as, perhaps, to inject a little disclaimer at the outset, something akin to 'whatever I say will be attacked, so I'm simply going to go ahead and say this, whether it be judged right or wrong'. All of this notwithstanding, of course, it is also the case that agitated scholars are much less dangerous than angry politicians and trigger-happy frontline soldiers, although the first group also has its damage to cause; but, in the final analysis, let academic polar bears wrestle in their frosty habitats, beating each other with articles and books, while demobilisation of armies proceeds and civilian populations begin to enjoy the normality of existence that most scholars, Western-based at least, take for granted.

The purpose of this paper is to offer some observations on a relationship (or perhaps several contemporaneous and intertwined relationships) between two regions, two peoples, two political movements—a relationship (or relationships) which has (or have) defined a huge swathe of the Horn of Africa over the last generation, and indeed beyond. The focal point of the paper is Eritrea, its relations with, and perceptions of, Tigray. It is not intended to be exhaustive: truly exhaustive work on this topic could not be contained within a single article. It represents, rather, some thoughts based on a handful of key documents, field interviews and less 'formal' informants (deliberately *not* high-ranking officials, as their views have been well-aired), and a range of secondary literature much of which, indeed, has been so necessarily contemporary that it can be classed as a kind of alternative body of primary source material, certainly in terms of assessing outside perceptions of the relationship under study. The paper will hopefully serve to push the argument toward a synthesis of understanding; it is certainly not intended to provoke ire, however unavoidable that outcome may be, considering that the author is mainly concerned to examine the relationship with particular reference to the past, present and future status of Eritrea and Eritreans. The fact that it is therefore to some extent 'Eri-centric' in its deliberations does not, one hopes, render it 'anti-Ethiopian', as is often assumed. To quote the Eritrean People's Liberation Front is not to support them; to utilise the assertions of an emotional Eritrean informant is not to endorse his or her views; to criticise one 'side' is not to ally oneself with the other. (This has also been a problem in the context of the media coverage of the conflict.) The purpose is to use such information as can be thus accumulated to measure the nature of the relationship, and perceptions of that relationship. The aim of this paper is to place certain tensions, disagreements and misunderstandings in relation to the war which broke out in 1998. The paper does not aim to explain the war *per se*,

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which would involve a rather different study: analysing economic developments, for example, between 1991 and 1998; gathering data relating to border matters during the same period and indeed much earlier; analysing in detail the diplomatic and political wranglings of the two governments after Eritrean independence. The aim here is to discuss certain aspects of the relationship in the context of eventual inter-state conflict. The 1998–2000 war, in other words, is actually our starting point: and from that point the paper works backwards, aiming to explain how certain much longer-standing issues contributed to it. Nor is the paper supposed to be a detailed study of the two movements themselves. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front, or EPLF (Pool, 2001), and the Tigray People's Liberation Front, or TPLF (Young, 1997), were not monolithic movements: they had their internal crises, shifts in direction, leadership rivalries and schisms, their own wars to fight, as it were. The paper does not deal in any detail with the individuals behind the acronyms, but is concerned only with what the movements came to represent; we are interested in their particular standpoints and strategies, and not how those standpoints and strategies were arrived at in terms of the internal politics of individuals. The histories of these movements has been thoroughly and admirably dealt with by other scholars; they concern us only insofar as their disagreements in the field reflected the broader, historical tensions and problems of the two regions and peoples, again in direct relation to Eritrean perception and identity.

While this piece does assume a certain degree of prior knowledge of the recent history of the Horn among its readers, it is perhaps advisable to outline in very brief terms the fundamentals of that history, although there is an Appendix at the end of this paper which is aimed as a guide for non-specialist readers. The governments which led Ethiopia and Eritrea to war in May 1998 were descended from liberation movements whose destruction of the Ethiopian Marxist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam—known popularly as the *Derg*, the Amharic for 'committee'—had resulted in their elevation to power in 1991. The EPLF had, from the early 1970s, overcome its rivals in the field to become the sole movement in the struggle for Eritrean independence from Ethiopia; the TPLF had fought first for independence, or at least autonomy, but later framed its war in the wider context of a democratic Ethiopia. Both were ultimately successful. But their triumph institutionalised a set of disagreements and contradictions which had plagued relations between the movements since the liberation war, during which they had—necessarily—both military and political contacts. These tensions reflected the problematic nature of the historical relationship between Eritrea and Tigray more broadly, and incorporated such issues as land, identity and, ultimately, destiny, as well as mutual misconceptions and misunderstandings as to the other's mental outlook. This has been, perhaps, most visibly manifest in the common Tigrayan resentment of a perceived Eritrean superiority complex, the origins of which are unclear but most likely stems from Eritrea's Italian colonial experience. Above all, the new reality of an independent Eritrean state from 1991, its very

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FIGURE 1 The Region

Key ethnic regions mentioned in the text: AFAR, AMHARA, TIGRAY, TIGRINYA



Note: These maps do not reflect the decisions recently taken by the UN Border Commission, but rather describe the colonial borders to be found on most maps of the region drawn during the period under study. Areas contested between 1998 and 2000 are marked on FIGURE 3.

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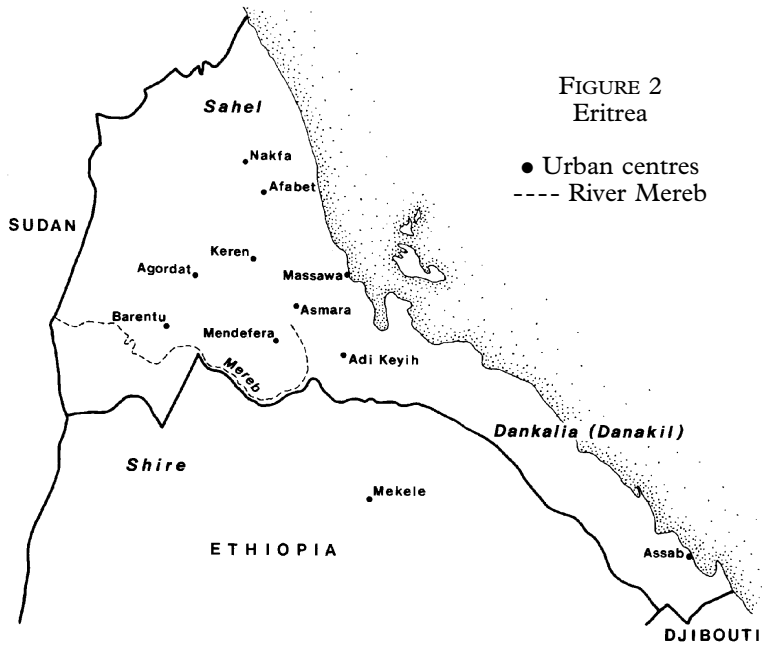


FIGURE 2
Eritrea

● Urban centres
---- River Mereb

Regions mentioned in the text: ***Dankalia (Danakil), Sahel, Shire***

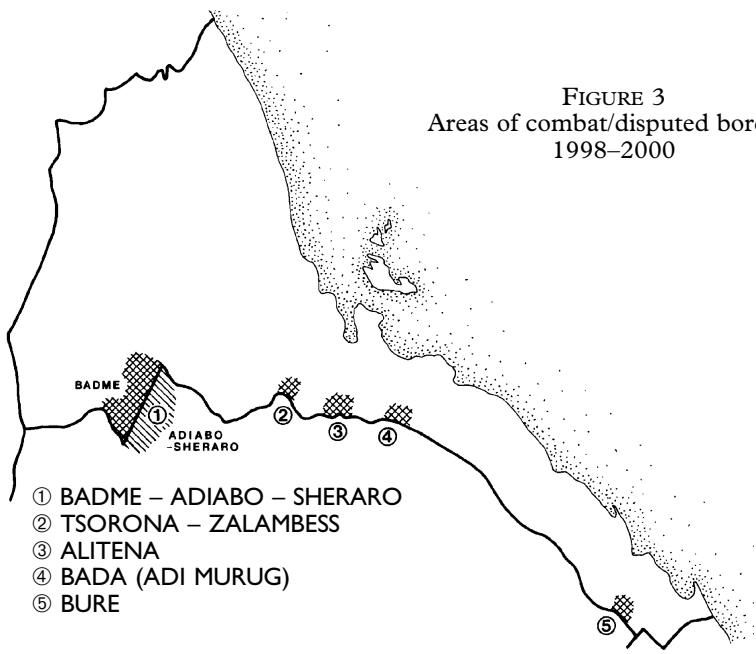


FIGURE 3
Areas of combat/disputed borders
1998–2000

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existence a refutation of much received wisdom concerning the region's history (Reid, 2001), threw the relationship under examination into sharp relief.

The EPLF reformulated itself as the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in 1994, and became—as it remains—the sole and ruling political party in Eritrea, while the TPLF formed the dominant part of a broad alliance of movements in Ethiopia, known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which formed the basis of a new government in Addis Ababa. During the mid-1990s, there was much public discourse between the two governments—governments which, at their cores, were composed of and directed by veterans of the wars of liberation in the 1970s and 1980s, although this was much more blatantly the case in Eritrea—on the need for closer economic and political co-operation, and some tangible moves were made in this direction, for example on matters of trade, nationality and residency, and defence. The most visible indication of disharmony came with the introduction of a new Eritrean currency in late 1997, which created a certain degree of rancour in commercial and financial relations; and then, in May 1998, with supposedly shocking suddenness, the two countries found themselves at war over the matter of borders and undemarcated territory at various points along their common frontier. It quickly transpired that minor, localised border clashes had been taking place since at least 1993, gaining in intensity in the middle of 1997. Early hopes that the conflict could be contained proved baseless, and the war escalated into perhaps the largest conventional conflict of its kind since Iran–Iraq in the 1980s. It ended in June 2000, with a formal agreement following in December; at the time of writing, however, relations have not been normalised.

THE GREAT UNEXPECTED WAR? MODERN MEMORY AND INTERPRETATION

The terms in which much of the world's media framed its thoughts on the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia were markedly one-dimensional. There is nothing unusual in this: rarely have contemporary Western observers attempted to apply to African warfare the same sophisticated analysis which they apply to their own (Reid, 2000). These were two bald men fighting over a comb; two poverty-stricken African nations (the 'hostile tribes' concept was lurking just below the surface) fighting for pride at the expense of the material dignity of their populations; two ignorant governments engaging in brutal and bloody 'First World War tactics' for pieces of insignificant land. When Africans fight, the world tuts disapprovingly, which is one thing, and condescendingly, which is another. But in looking at the nature of Eritrean–Tigrayan relations over time and space, one thing is clear in the first instance: the war itself, while it took most (including the author) by surprise when it first came to public attention, was not a tragic but isolated interruption of the normal course of events. A study of certain aspects of the recent past provides something of the answer to what many in 1998 held to be an

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impenetrable puzzle, for the war now appears as part of a much longer and more complex sequence of events and relationships. It was a commonplace to state that no-one expected a conflict, among Eritreans and foreign correspondents alike; yet there is no conflict in human history which is completely unexpected to everyone involved in it, as we shall see.

There seems little need to discuss in any detail the incidents on the south-western Eritrean border in May 1998, nor the events around them, as these have been dealt with elsewhere (Ruth Iyob, 2000: 663, 672–6; Tekeste and Tronvoll, 2000: 1, 28–9), and are not in any case central to our story. Suffice it to say here that the exchange of fire between Eritrean and Ethiopian armed units around the tiny village of Badme, and incidents in the same and other areas some months previously, swiftly led to the escalation of what appeared initially to be a border clash into full-scale inter-state war. Since the outbreak of the conflict, there has been a growing and natural focus on the relationship between the protagonists, chiefly the liberation fronts themselves, both during the liberation war and since Eritrean independence in 1991. A handful of scholars have sought to 'make sense of it all'. Ruth Iyob, for example, is surely right to caution against 'glib analyses [and] simplistic answers' in her study of 'diasporic' Eritrea's relations with 'hegemonic' Ethiopia (Ruth Iyob, 2000: 660), while the title used by Tekeste Negash and Kjetil Tronvoll for their book on the conflict, *Brothers at War*, leaves no doubt even before the reader opens the volume about how the authors view the relationship between the two countries, and how presumably 'unnatural' they consider the conflict to have been. They belong to what might be labelled the 'family rift' camp, the two bald men fighting over the comb assumed to be closely related (Tekeste and Tronvoll, 2000: 12–21). The work of Matsuoka and Sorenson (2001) offers some intelligent and thoughtful insights into regional identities and loyalties. Such work has also drawn on earlier, pre-war (and liberation war-era) scholarship dealing with relations during the armed struggle, including research undertaken by John Young (1996, 1997, 1998), David Pool (1983, 1998, 2001), Patrick Gilkes (1983) and Alemseged Abbay (1998). It is worth noting at this juncture, however, that those writing on Eritrea have usually tended to have rather less to say on relations with the TPLF than vice versa: we will return to this point later.

This has also been, among Eritreans, a time of reflection concerning their relationship with Ethiopia in general and Tigray in particular. While a great many informed observers of the liberation war, and of course Eritreans themselves, were aware of the difficult relationship between the movements, or at the very least between the leadership of the movements, during that period, there developed after 1991 something of a public myth based on the notion that the friendship of brothers in arms had successfully made the transition to government. It enabled, for example, President Clinton to talk of an 'African renaissance', and it is certainly true that a cursory glance at the public relationship between the two governments for much of the 1990s would

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have led the casual observer to conclude that these were indeed two very close allies. The silence, perhaps, should have been deafening: prior to the war, there was scarcely any detailed public discourse in Eritrea on the relationship between 1991 and 1998 (nor, indeed, on that during the 1970s and 1980s), save for official statements proclaiming how well it was all going and on plans for closer relations in the future. Once the war erupted, however, and perhaps especially following the deportation of large numbers of Eritreans from Ethiopia, there was an outpouring of opinion concerning the nature of the Ethiopian state in general (depicted in a perennial, almost ahistorical, manner), and Tigray and Tigrayans in particular. This seemed to represent a deep well of emotion which Eritreans had sealed up in favour of a quiet life. To be fair, the jubilation following the achievement of independence was more than enough, for ordinary Eritreans at any rate, to engender a selective amnesia concerning certain less pleasant aspects in the history of the liberation war. If so, however, then the events of 1998–2000 were a brutal awakening: their own history had returned to haunt them. The author once put this to a veteran of the liberation war, who had never before spoken to him of Tigray or the TPLF—known pejoratively as the *Woyane*[1]—but who promptly launched into a historical lecture outlining how Tigrayans could never be trusted, neither now nor during the liberation struggle.[2]

Yet closer examination of the views expressed by Eritreans about Tigray, the TPLF (represented in this context as a monolithic 'thing') and Ethiopia in general reveals some interesting paradoxes in the perception and understanding of these relationships. This is especially, although by no means exclusively, true in the border areas, affected most profoundly by the recent war and in particular by the Ethiopian offensive of May–June 2000.[3] On the one hand, there is the idea that 'good relations' had always existed across the border, that highland communities on either side of the Mereb River—which defines much of the central section of the frontier—were indelibly intertwined, shared cultural links, were socially involved with one another (in terms of

[1] The term *Woyane* simply means 'uprising' or 'revolt', and was apparently first used during the Tigrayan insurrection against Emperor Haile Sellassie in 1943. The term was not derogatory in the first instance, but the EPLF made it thus; in the other direction, the TPLF nicknamed the EPLF *sha'abiya*, Arabic for 'popular' or 'of the people', again not actually insulting in terms of strict meaning but in certain contexts pejorative nonetheless.

[2] This conversation took place in June 2000, following Ethiopia's full-scale invasion of Eritrea, and at a time when anti-Tigrayan feeling across Ethiopia was at fever pitch. The Eritrean Government had begun a programme of repatriation, but in the wake of the Ethiopian army's success many now asserted that it was too late, that the sizeable Tigrayan community in Eritrea had already done the damage in terms of undermining the Eritrean war effort from within. There is no doubt that something of a scapegoat was needed. Nonetheless, the author's informant explained that during the liberation war, the *Derg* authorities had infiltrated EPLF cells and spied on the inhabitants of Asmara using Tigrayans, who of course spoke Tigrinya and who were thus difficult to distinguish from Eritrean highlanders.

[3] The author toured these areas extensively in July and August 2000, shortly after the ceasefire.

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weddings, funerals and religious feast-days, for example), and were commercially dependent on one another. According to this view, the events of 1998 and after were particularly appalling because of the manner in which those good relations had been so abruptly betrayed and forsaken. One informant explained to the author how, before the war, 'our relations with Tigray . . . were good', and how 'we had the same culture'. Now, however, following the war, 'the relationship is forever damaged'.[4] On the other hand, however, there is the view that 'we knew all along that something like this would happen'. Tigrayans—or 'Agame',[5] as Eritreans sometimes contemptuously refer to them—cannot be trusted and never could. One EPLF veteran told the author how in 1991, upon the winning of Eritrean independence, 'our grandparents' had warned against trying to improve the relationship with Tigray, saying, 'Be careful, these people are dangerous, we know them well!'[6] In other words, things have ever been thus, and they will be always.

In reality, of course, as was also the case during the liberation war, these two views are not necessarily mutually exclusive; rather, they reflect the complexity of the relationship, and indeed it is a relationship which is more complex than many Eritreans, perhaps, would care to admit. Certainly, the 'Tigray issue' for Eritreans, and the 'Eritrea issue' for Tigrayans, is a distinct one within the broader arena of Eritrean–Ethiopian relations, because there is a closeness—whether uncomfortable, or snug, or both—between Eritrea and Tigray which is clearly not demonstrable for relations between Eritrea and other parts of Ethiopia. At the same time, however, the apparently paradoxical perception of Tigray in Eritrea is a reflection of the much broader perception of Ethiopia as a whole, and symptomatic of the intrinsically problematic relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia which have always existed but which have only comparatively recently attracted closer attention. It is clear, above all, that Eritreans have been simultaneously naïve and cynical, open and suspicious: 'Tigrayans were our brothers; you can never trust a Tigrayan'; 'we can work openly with Ethiopia as equal and sovereign partners'; 'Ethiopia will always have a jealous and expansionist policy toward Eritrea'.

Sometimes, indeed, the two views appear side by side, a clear contradiction emerging in the perception of what Tigray *is* or *does*, in terms of historical patterns and the characteristics of the relationship. As one informant told the author:

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[4] Interviewed by the author: Mekonen Gebrehiwot, Tsadika, Eritrea, 18 July 2000.

[5] The precise origins of the term 'Agame' as an insult are unclear. Agame is a district in the eastern part of modern Tigray, with its capital at Adigrat. Eritreans tended to refer to all Tigrayans who came across the border looking for work in Eritrea as 'Agame', and the negative connotations of the term derive from the fact that these migrant labourers took on menial, low-paid work, saving money to take or send back to Tigray. The word itself, it seems, often reflects a wider attitude which has had a significant psychological impact on Tigrayans, who regard the insult as clear evidence of the Eritrean superiority complex.

[6] Interviewed by the author: Simon Berhane, Adi Nefas, Eritrea, 20 July 2000.

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> Eritrea and Tigray have had a long relationship. Over all these border areas, there was trade, exchange, movement of people in both directions. People often moved deep inside each other's territory, carrying commodities. The *Woyane* are trying to eradicate this relationship . . . History is being repeated by the *Woyane*. Tigrayan feudal rulers were coming to Eritrea from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries [sic], for example, and as a result all the villages in this part of Eritrea are located on hilltops, for safety and protection. Tigrayans were always coming to Eritrea to loot and destroy; the *Woyane* are simply repeating history.[7]

Thus is the volatility and paradox of the proverbial 'frontier' underlined, a situation by no means unique to Eritreans and Ethiopians; it may be assumed that a distinction is nonetheless actually being drawn here between the 'people' of Tigray and their rulers.

Strong emotion, particularly among oral informants in the border areas, should of course be taken into account in analysing statements made in the immediate aftermath of the fighting, and extreme assertions should generally be treated with caution. This caveat heeded, however, it is also true that the expressions of shock and anger are revealing of popular attitudes toward neighbouring Tigray in particular, as well as Ethiopia in general. It should also be remembered that the oral informants of this story are hardly unaccustomed to war and hardship, and thus they are, as it were, 'experts' in levels of both regional and local crisis. A great many informants emphasised that the recent war, and in particular the Ethiopian offensive of May and June 2000, far surpassed anything before witnessed in the region in living memory, in terms of intensity of military activity, bloodshed and levels of vitriol. One elderly farmer[8] in an area which was the focus of a major Ethiopian attack claimed he had seen nothing like it in his lifetime, even though he had lived through the civil war between the Eritrean liberation movements in the late 1970s,[9] and the later attempts by the forces of the *Derg* to crush the Eritrean guerrillas in the area. A local administrator made a similar claim, asserting that 'the soldiers of the *Derg* brought destruction only to military targets; but the *Woyane* have committed atrocities against poor farmers. This is completely different, and much worse'.[10] Another informant exclaimed that 'we have seen many successive Ethiopian regimes; but the *Woyane* we cannot understand'.[11] His colleague concurred, asserting that 'successive Ethiopian regimes said, "we do not want the Eritrean people, only

[7] Interviewed by the author: Simon Berhane, Adi Nefas, Eritrea, 20 July 2000. The informant became excited by the author's questions on this theme, and prior to his short lecture exclaimed, 'You are the historian, why are you asking me? You should know this already!'

[8] Interviewed by the author: Tesfamichael Kahsay, the Tsadakelay valley area, Eritrea, 18 July 2000.

[9] See ELF and EPLF in the Appendix.

[10] Interviewed by the author: Mekonen Gebrehiwot, Tsadika, Eritrea, 18 July 2000.

[11] Interviewed by the author: Woldeab Mitsun, Adi Nefas, Eritrea, 19 July 2000.

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land and property." But the *Woyane* are trying to destroy Eritrean culture, identity, its very existence'.[12]

Understandable though these kinds of statements may be, they are not easy to accept at face value, and it must be assumed that they reflect a quite distinct set of values and perceptions. The *Derg* carried out a wide range of atrocities against civilians, a fact which is now well documented and which was certainly appreciated at the time (Dines, 1988; Harding, 1993); that regime can also be accused of having been committed to the 'destruction of Eritrean identity'. It is striking to see the *Derg* somehow 'humanised' in this way, albeit by default, but the issue here may be one of 'accepted norms'. The destruction brought to Eritrea by the Tigrayan-led army was considerable in many areas, but by no stretch of the imagination could it be considered worse—in material terms—than that resulting from *Derg* military operations. In some way, perhaps, destruction of this kind is 'acceptable' when it is inflicted by a distant, Amhara-dominated regime in Addis Ababa, but it becomes wholly 'unacceptable' when it comes from the direction of neighbouring Tigray. It is the identification of Tigray at the heart of the 1998–2000 war, therefore, which is paramount. It might also be suggested that dissatisfaction in some quarters at the manner in which the Eritrean government prosecuted the war—it was compelled to withdraw its army from huge swathes of territory in western and southern Eritrea in May 2000—generated a deep sense of anger which was nonetheless not directed at the Eritrean government, this being neither a moral nor a political option at that time, but at Ethiopia. This is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

The writings of Eritreans, both inside Eritrea and abroad, after the outbreak of the war would fill several volumes, not all of them scientifically useful. It will suffice to take a few short examples to illustrate some of the key themes: the following post-1998 samples all appear in one particularly relevant issue of the *Eritrean Studies Review*, the journal of the Eritrean Studies Association.[13] Here, for example, emphasis is placed on the notion of 'Greater Tigray' expansionism, developed by the more militant wing of the TPLF, which according to one writer 'threatens Eritrea's territorial integrity' (Kidane Mengisteab, 1999: 92). As we shall see, this is one of those ideas which apparently sprang out of nowhere in the late 1990s but which in fact has a lengthy genealogy. The notion of a 'grander plan' on the part of the TPLF-dominated Ethiopian government is described in an article which draws explicit comparisons between current Tigrayan aggression and the incursions of Emperor Yohannes and his trusted commander Ras Alula in the 1870s and 1880s (Jordan Gebre-Medhin, 1999). Again, this was

[12] Interviewed by the author: *Keshi* [priest] Tekabo Habte, Adi Nefas, Eritrea, 19 July 2000. This informant's church had been badly damaged in the fierce fighting around the village of Adi Nefas, ironically by Eritrean artillery fire which was directed at the Ethiopians based in the village.

[13] 'Special Issue' of the *Eritrean Studies Review*, 3 (2) (1999).

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not the first time that perceptions of the deeper past had been fashioned into weaponry by modern protagonists. Indeed, in his introduction to the volume, the editor pulls no punches:

> . . . just as Yohannes met with resistance from Eritrea, so will the TPLF, a group that seems to have learned nothing from Emperor Yohannes' disastrous Eritrean experience. The TPLF's inability to learn from history will lead to the ultimate destruction of Mekele's political and military power. [Tekie Fessehatzion, 1999: v]

In another essay, the writer—a senior veteran of the liberation war and currently a researcher in the PFDJ—recalls a tour by some TPLF leaders to the EPLF base area, and relates how their lectures were concerned solely with 'the indignities and insults suffered by the people of Tigray'. Different peoples, including Eritreans, had for years looked down on Tigrayans, and this, announced one speaker, would now be rectified. There was, apparently, no discussion of ideology or matters of political or military urgency facing both liberation movements, but only an indignant rant about how Tigrayans would soon be treated with the respect they deserved. The writer recalls being disturbed by the speech. The struggle of the EPLF, he asserts,

> was a war of independence pure and simple—we warned the enemy out of our country. [That of the TPLF], we felt, had a frightening psychological aspect. Satisfaction for them could only come, we agreed, if they rose above the common run, from which elevated status they could 'do unto others as had been done unto them'. Danger there, somewhere! [Alemseged Tesfai, 1999: 216]

He assures us, moreover, that '[t]his is not a hindsight reconstruction, but what we all felt at the time. When in the eighties the TPLF launched its four or five year hate-EPLF campaign, therefore, it did not come as a complete surprise' (*ibid.*). The rift between the movements in the mid-1980s, as we shall see, is one thing; whether or not the 1998 war came as a 'complete surprise' to this particular author is not made clear. He would surely have understood from his own experience, however, that liberation wars—to paraphrase Oscar Wilde—are rarely pure and never simple, although it is classic EPLF-speak to portray theirs in precisely that manner.

Finally, a non-Eritrean, the journalist and noted 'Eri-phile' Dan Connell has a contribution to make. Writing of Badme, the village where the shooting began in May 1998, he recalls that

> [t]his remote peasant hamlet was under Eritrean administration in 1985 when I visited it with EPLF guerrillas, just after it had been obliterated by Ethiopian jet fighters, and it appeared within Eritrea on all the maps of the day. However, a week later I crossed the border into Tigray with the TPLF to witness the exodus of thousands of starving Tigrayans on their way to Sudan. When I mentioned where I'd just been, a TPLF fighter commented, 'You were not in Eritrea—Badme is Tigray.' At the time, I thought little of it, but in retrospect, this was a signal that details count. [Connell, 1999: 197]

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Details certainly did count, as liberation movement leaders, if not Dan Connell, were very well aware at the time. At any rate, 'hindsight' and 'retrospect' were in general awarded great significance at the end of the 1990s, but, as we shall see, not everyone would have needed such analytical tools to understand what had actually happened in 1998, while at least some claims of complete surprise must be regarded as somewhat disingenuous.

A BYZANTINE REVOLUTION (1): THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY

It was unavoidable that the Eritrean and Tigrayan liberation struggles would become intertwined, in terms of geographical proximity if not fraternal union; they shared the most basic common objective in the destruction of the *Derg* regime. But were conflict and co-operation inevitable in equal measure? John Young (1996) has referred to the 'pragmatic' nature of their co-operation. But that sphere of mutual benefit was always limited in scope and nature by disagreements and misunderstandings between the movements which went to the very heart of the relationship under study, and which were unresolved at the end of the liberation war, and remained so throughout the 1990s. They were derived from the uncompromising nature of the Eritrean liberation struggle, at least as defined and led by the EPLF, and the difficulties which certain elements within the leadership of the TPLF had in dealing and coming to terms with this. These problems, more clearly discernible now than perhaps they were before 1998, would nonetheless have been well known to the leadership circles as well as to informed observers of the two movements over the past twenty years. A closer examination of the problems themselves demonstrates the degree to which the war in 1998 should have been anticipated. The story of the relations between the various Eritrean and Ethiopian movements is a complex and convoluted one, and challenges the concentration of the most acronym-conscious student (Ruth Iyob, 1995; Pool, 2001: 147–50). At base, however, it underlines the degree to which these movements were indelibly and often bitterly intertwined, their changing fortunes alternatively blamed on or associated with one another. It is, in more than one sense, a sorry tale of chronic disunity and frequently petty, arcane and largely meaningless disputes—at least for 'the people', which movements on either side of the Mereb purported to represent—in the face of a more powerful enemy. It helps to explain the determination of the EPLF to emerge as the sole movement in the struggle for Eritrean independence, as well as its resolve in government to engender a sense of absolute national unity at whatever cost. To a lesser extent, perhaps, it also explains the TPLF's later determination to consolidate power in Ethiopia as a whole. Certainly, the experiences of the struggle have made both movements painfully aware of the consequences of disunity and political fragmentation.

The origins of the TPLF itself as an organisation would become something of a sore point over time. It is widely accepted that the modern Tigrayan nationalist movement was created with Eritrean

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assistance (Clapham, 1988: 60, 209; Keller, 1988: 208, 210; Young, 1998: 37), although as Young has presciently argued, this should neither be over-simplified nor exaggerated (Young, 1996: 105). Certainly, Tigrayans resented the implication that their struggle was created and maintained by the EPLF, and that their movement was a mere adjunct of the latter. This was not simply in response to the perceived aloofness of the EPLF leadership, returned to below, but also to the fact that even the Ethiopian state-run media, in its tirades against the bandits of the north, would often omit to mention the Tigrayan struggle altogether, instead lumping it in with that of the Eritreans. Much early wrangling between the movements, then, must be interpreted as stemming from Tigrayan self-assertion, as jostling for position took place *vis-à-vis* a myriad of other 'revolutionary' groups, including the ELF, the TLF, and the EPRP (see Appendix).

Analysis of key documents dating from the mid-1980s reveals the nature of some of the tensions, contradictions and misunderstandings within the relationship. These documents—from both the EPLF and TPLF—are not, of course, to be treated as unproblematic sources of information: they were very much the products of their age, and were produced *after* relations between the two movements had already been broken off. To some extent, they were written to justify what had happened. At the same time, however, they must be regarded as key contemporary statements on the nature and form of the relationship at its worst, and to that end are revealing of the issues, attitudes and ideological and/or political standpoints which this paper is interested in exploring. They highlight a number of problems which would come back to haunt the movements in government, and demonstrate the lengthy genealogy of certain issues which can be understood as having contributed to uneasy relations at the time—the height of the struggle—and more specifically to the outbreak of war between two sovereign states over a decade later. Some of the arguments between the movements were largely of contemporary relevance only, and not of long-term significance, and therefore do not concern us here. There was disagreement, for example, over the military strategy of the EPLF,[14] following the strategic retreat of the Eritreans to the north of the country in the face of new Soviet-backed Ethiopian offensives. This was in fact as much about the perceived 'democratic' and 'popular' nature of the movements themselves as about actual strategy, and the matter was never fully resolved, even though military co-operation would resume toward the end of the 1980s (Young, 1996: 108–9).[15]

[14] Publications of the EPLF: 'The TPLF and the development of its relations with the EPLF' (c.1984): Research and Documentation Centre, Asmara (hereafter RDC), Acc. No. 05062/Rela/3, pp. 11, 24–6; Publications of the TPLF: 'The Eritrean Struggle, From Where to Where? An Assessment', (1985 [1978 Ethiopian Calendar]): RDC Acc. No. Rela/10359, pp. 109-13. I am grateful to Brook Tesfay for assistance in translating some of this material. Sections of directly quoted material are free translations.

[15] Tigrayan leaders accused the EPLF of fighting a conventional, 'bourgeois' military campaign, divorced from 'the people' in its struggle.

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Some of the other professed differences—such as the two fronts' respective attitudes toward the Soviet Union—reflect the seemingly limitless capacity for pedantry among revolutionary ideologues. But there were issues which were clearly of major significance for future relations between a sovereign Eritrea and a Tigrayan-dominated Ethiopia, and these included the interrelated questions of 'nationality', or national and ethnic identity, and the boundaries of Eritrea.

At the core of the disagreement over the 'nationality' question lay the issue of the ultimate objectives of the Eritrean and Tigrayan movements respectively. While the Eritrean movement described its struggle as 'anti-colonial' and unambiguously sought complete independence for Eritrea, the TPLF at times appeared somewhat confused as it developed its own programme. Was it to be an exclusively 'Tigrayan nationalist' movement, or should it regard itself as the vanguard of a democratic Ethiopian alliance? The resolution of this basic question would involve conflict with the Eritreans, and reflected, whether subliminally or consciously, the strains and contradictions in the Eritrean–Tigrayan relationship (Gilkes, 1983: 205–6). Initially, the TPLF appeared to present itself as a secessionist movement, with the establishment of an independent republic of Tigray as its cardinal aim (Young, 1997: 99). The movement seemed to be articulating the idea that a 'multi-ethnic' organisation was unrealistic and that separate peoples should fight their own wars of liberation. In its manifesto of 1975, for example, the TPLF defined a Tigrayan as anyone who spoke Tigrinya, the language of central highland Eritrea as well as of Tigray itself; it also included 'frontier' groups such as the Irob and the Afar, found in both Eritrea and Tigray. This attempt to define a 'pure' Tigrayan, whether consciously or not impinging on highland Eritrea, was nevertheless later interpreted by the EPLF as a dangerous new form of Tigrayan nationalism.[16] On its part the TPLF asserted that from the outset it had supported the Eritrean cause, which it believed to be a just anti-colonial struggle.[17] It is noteworthy, indeed, that the TPLF later claimed as its 'great achievement' its success in influencing the Ethiopian people, particularly Tigrayans, as to the justness of the Eritrean cause. The Tigrayan people needed to 'change their negative mindset on the Eritrean question'.[18] It is significant that the 'Tigrayan people' needed the most persuading, while the extent to which the TPLF actually persuaded itself of the justness of the Eritrean cause is a matter of some debate.

The EPLF expressed concern about what it regarded as an aggressive new form of Tigrayan nationalism, the ultimate goal of which was the establishment of a Tigrayan nation-state, and in which the perils of the political usage of history—something at which the leaders of the EPLF were also becoming adept—were becoming clear. For example, the

[16] RDC Acc. No. 05062/Rela/3, p. 4.
[17] RDC Acc. No. Rela/10359, pp. 42–3.
[18] *ibid.*, pp. 44–5, 47.

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TPLF asserted that Tigray's emergence as a modern 'nation' could be dated to the reign of Emperor Yohannes (1872–89), the first Tigrayan ruler of the highland Christian kingdom for several centuries (Young, 1997: 99).[19] This would have given Eritreans cause for concern: the focus on Yohannes meant, for them, the military incursions of his right-hand man Ras Alula onto the Eritrean plateau, while Yohannes himself was probably the first ruler in the modern era to clearly articulate claims over large parts of what later became Eritrea, which it was asserted had long formed part of the 'historic' Abyssinian kingdom (Portal, 1892). These claims had been further developed by successive Ethiopian regimes through the twentieth century. It may be wondered whether the TPLF was innocently unaware of the implications of their historical attachment to Yohannes, and the manner in which it could cause offence to Eritreans, even to a movement such as the EPLF which, while absorbed in the machinations of the 1940s, has to date shown very little interest, political or otherwise, in the pre-colonial era. But whether conscious or not, the Yohannes fixation reflected one of the TPLF's core difficulties, that of identity, and of defining Tigray, particularly without Eritrea. It was an exercise in self-definition which could not be divorced from the clarification of relations with Eritrea or, for that matter, with Ethiopia as a whole (Clapham, 1988: 211).

Disagreement over the question of nationality is to some degree symbolised by the issue of ethnic groups within Eritrea and Tigray, in particular the Afar. The TPLF, as stated in its initial manifesto, believed the Afar of Tigray to be an integral part of the proposed nation-state, and as such the Tigrayans declared themselves strongly opposed to the Afar liberation movement then in operation, stating that the latter could not be allowed to compete with the TPLF itself. The TPLF did, however, support the right of the Eritrean Afar to secede, and further, supported the concept of an 'Afar triangle' incorporating those of Eritrea, north-east Ethiopia and Djibouti.[20] On the one hand this can be seen as part of an attempt by the TPLF to portray its struggle as a 'national' one, in which all peoples within Tigray were 'Tigrayans', but that of Eritrea as 'multi-national', as Eritrea—an artificial colonial creation—was composed of many 'nations'. In a strange sense this seems to have been a deliberate rebuttal of the Eritreans' own original argument, that Tigray must fight for Ethiopia, not simply itself. It certainly represented a significant modification of the TPLF's earlier professed support for Eritrea's cause; for the EPLF it smacked of hypocrisy, as the Tigrayan movement, which refused to countenance rival secessionist movements in its own province, was simultaneously telling the EPLF that it must co-operate with other Eritrean movements.[21] The Tigrayans were attempting to articulate a

[19] RDC Acc. No. 05062/Rela/3, pp. 19–20.
[20] *ibid.*, p. 20. The TPLF did eventually, toward the end of the 1980s, cooperate with the Afar Liberation Front.
[21] *ibid.*, p. 27.

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clear sense of united nationhood—and of course here both movements had much in common, and that in itself would necessarily cause friction—while deliberately undermining that of Eritrea and denying the Eritrean struggle the same nationalist substance as their own. At the same time, there may well have been a link between the TPLF's support for the 'Afar triangle' and its claim, as we shall see, for access to the sea through the Danakil. Certainly, much of this pushing and shoving between the two movements seems to clarify some of the apparently arcane arguments which emerged more publicly after 1998.

The Eritrean position, of which the TPLF was highly suspicious, on secession and the related question of nationalities was that while the right of secession might apply to groups oppressed by undemocratic government, the principle of 'democratic unity' should take precedence over secession. For the TPLF, this was a violation of the fundamental right of people to self-determination, whether under democratic or undemocratic systems of rule.[22] The EPLF was clearly determined—as it remains today—to put to rest any spectre of internal Eritrean disunity, while encouraging the Tigrayans to plan for a united and democratic Ethiopia. The bottom line, of course, is that the EPLF was not really particularly interested in the issue of secession, as the entire Eritrean struggle was formed around an anti-colonial ethos; secession as a hypothetical notion did not concern the EPLF in the way that it clearly did the TPLF in the wider Ethiopian context, even if the TPLF would argue that secession *should* have concerned the Eritreans, i.e. in terms of the right of Eritrean 'nationalities' to secede (Young, 1996: 112–3). In any case, the EPLF was drawing a clear distinction between its struggle and that of Tigray. The disagreements between Eritrea and Tigray on this issue did not bode well for future relations, because it was clear that any future Tigrayan-dominated Ethiopian government would be doubtful as to the actual legitimacy of Eritrea's entire struggle, as directed and controlled by the EPLF. The irony of some of the Eritreans' statements cannot have been lost on the EPLF's own leaders. They firmly rejected the concept of an independent Tigrayan nation, stating that Tigray lacked the 'economic, social and historical background' necessary to claim sovereign status,[23] which is exactly what had been said of Eritrea itself forty years earlier. By a strange twist of argument—and these arguments certainly had their twists—the EPLF was inadvertently investing in the 'historic Ethiopia' idea, the bane of the Eritrean nationalist, by dismissing thus the basis of independent Tigrayan nationhood, as though Tigray had always been part of a larger, permanent state. The periods in which 'Tigray' had been autonomous from, if not wholly independent of, any central 'Abyssinian' government—for example for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—were overlooked. The TPLF, curiously, also

[22] RDC Acc. No. Rela/10359, pp. 161–2.
[23] RDC Acc. No. 05062/Rela/3, p. 20.

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overlooked this, preferring instead to focus on the historic concept of the united imperial 'Ethiopia' as represented, again, by the Tigrayan Emperor Yohannes. The TPLF's own historical viewpoint should actually have settled any modern dilemmas over secession or unity within Ethiopia: they had already answered their own question. Both sides, of course, could have come together to claim the inheritance of the ancient Axumite Empire, whose heartland straddled both modern Eritrea and Tigray, but this is, indeed, a different matter altogether.

The EPLF further regarded the Afar issue as 'very sensitive' and deserving of 'deep research and study'. While the Eritreans implied that, unlike the TPLF, they had no objection in principle to the activities of the separate Afar movement, they emphasised that the 'Afar question' would be solved with the establishment of an independent Eritrea, as would the 'question' of all the other ethnic groups inside Eritrea; at the same time, however, the Afar in Tigray and in north-east Ethiopia should be permitted to form their own democratic movements.[24] Each side was in effect telling the other the same thing, and which neither was prepared to do. For the EPLF, this was a deliberate riposte to the Tigrayan nationalist argument, and was a firm refusal to consider any discussion of Eritrean 'nationalities' in the same vein as Ethiopian 'nationalities'. Eritreans would achieve democratic unity in the end, under the sole guidance of the EPLF; Ethiopians were comprised of many nationalities, including Tigrayans, and they should also work together for democratic unity. In much of this discourse, it is possible to detect a vaguely patronising and aloof tone to EPLF pronouncements and statements of policy, the kind of attitude which the TPLF had come to resent. In reality, of course, and more importantly, this was not really a discourse at all. Each side was speaking *at* the other: Eritreans are Eritreans, said one; Tigrayans are Tigrayans, said the other. Each of them meant something completely different.

A BYZANTINE REVOLUTION (2): THE QUESTION OF BORDERS

The question of boundaries—the precise location of the frontier between the original Italian colony of Eritrea and the rest of Ethiopia—was clearly closely related to that of nationality, and would later return to haunt both governments in the most tragic of ways. Conflict in this sphere actually first occurred between the TPLF and the ELF, the EPLF's rival in the field, who began to contest boundaries between neighbouring administrative zones in south-west Eritrea and western Tigray (i.e. those areas considered 'liberated' by the contiguous guerrilla forces) and the position of the frontier in the area of Badme and Adiabo in the mid-1970s. This was at a time when Eritrea was divided up between ELF (broadly west and south-west) and EPLF

[24] *ibid.*

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(central highlands, south-east). The ELF claimed the region up to Sheraro as part of Eritrea, and as such asserted that the people inhabiting the region should be administered by the ELF; this was rejected by the Tigrayans, and armed clashes began to occur within the contested area from 1976 (Young, 1996: 106).[25] The TPLF claimed that the ELF was responsible in the first instance for raising the issues of 'boundaries and territorial claims'. Further, the ELF, 'without any historical or political grounds claimed that all the lowland Adiabo region was part of Eritrean territory . . . The TPLF . . . assessed [the problem] with tolerance and permitted the ELF to control the areas which had been previously administered by the ELF'; in other words, the Eritreans could continue to administer what they had already seized, until the TPLF regained control of these areas.[26] This they would eventually do in alliance with the EPLF in the latter's internal struggle with the ELF. In the meantime, however, the ELF was permitted to establish militia in those areas 'which were highly populated by Eritrean people'.[27] This last statement reflects a significant problem, then as more recently: even as the TPLF were claiming that one of the Eritrean movements had violated Tigrayan territorial integrity, they were acknowledging that the issue of actual 'nationality' in the border areas was rather more ambiguous, that there were 'Eritrean people' in the area being violated.

The destruction of the ELF as a fighting force in the Eritrean western lowlands by 1981 handed a great deal of this disputed region back to TPLF administration. This was, however, only the beginning of the problem. If the issue had originally been brought to the fore by ELF incursions, through the early 1980s it was taken up with even greater vigour by the Tigrayans. Whether this reflected Tigrayan alarm at initial Eritrean claims on their territory, whether they were made to feel vulnerable by the more powerful movements to the north in terms of territorial 'expansionism', is uncertain. Certainly, however, by the time a meeting between the movements was held in Khartoum in June and July 1983, borders were high on the agenda. The detail of the EPLF's later statement on the matter is, perhaps, an indictment of both sides' inability to settle the matter before 1998 even though they had had almost twenty years to do so:

> In the period between 1979 and 1983, at different times the TPLF had caused many serious problems and tensions on the question of boundaries. The EPLF stated then that it was not the right time to raise such questions and that the colonial boundary was clear. However, the TPLF [continued to raise] the boundary issue by claiming the territory of the district of Badme, in the centre Tsorona, and in the south Bada, while the TPLF inhibited the

[25] *ibid.*, p. 8.
[26] RDC Acc. No. Rela/10359, p. 51.
[27] *ibid.*

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> EPLF's movement in and administration of those areas. Moreover, the TPLF [claimed that] Tigray had an outlet to the outside world through Dankalia.[28]

All of this led the EPLF to assert, with a couple of years' hindsight, that 'from its early stages the TPLF had an expansionist policy on the question of boundaries'.[29] There certainly seems little doubt that the TPLF did regard the demarcation—and in some place the redrawing—of its provincial boundaries as a crucial preparatory step toward the establishment of a Tigrayan nation-state, should such an eventuality become desirable or feasible. The TPLF asserted that Tigray must be fully demarcated as a unified polity: its borders were not yet clear and should be made so, particularly as the province had lost territory under both Menelik and Haile Sellassie.[30] This was a reference not only to Eritrea, but also to Tigray's other neighbouring provinces in Ethiopia.

That the TPLF was unhappy with its current territory was something of which the EPLF would, by the end of the 1970s, have been very well aware. But the Eritreans, for reasons which are not entirely clear, but which were doubtless interpreted by the Tigrayans as representing characteristic Eritrean arrogance and aloofness, refused to discuss the matter. The EPLF stated unequivocally that 'Eritrea's legal boundary is its colonial boundary', and there could be no negotiation regarding 'any other fabricated boundary'.[31] Even the TPLF, however, claimed to be willing to shelve the matter until a later date: it asserted that it was not sufficient cause for conflict. It was, rather, a 'secondary question', and their sole reason for requesting demarcation was to clarify areas in which TPLF military units could operate and move freely against the enemy, a statement which the Eritreans may have regarded as somewhat disingenuous. In any case, the TPLF argued, the boundary issue would be resolved in the future, either by a democratic government of Ethiopia or by an independent Tigrayan state.[32] The major difference with the EPLF, of course, is that while the Tigrayans might concede the 'secondary' importance of the matter, the EPLF regarded it as a non-issue. Perhaps confronted with EPLF intransigence, and doubtless reflecting the fact that relations had by now broken down, the TPLF nevertheless warned that:

> this does not mean that there is no need for negotiation concerning the Eritrean–Ethiopian boundary . . . The TPLF's viewpoint is that Eritrea as a nation was created during Italian colonial rule. Therefore, by official agreement between the Ethiopian king Menelik II and the Italian government, the boundary between Eritrea and Ethiopia was clearly

[28] RDC Acc. No. 05062/Rela/3, pp. 4, 13. All the areas mentioned in this paragraph were fought over between May 1998 and June 2000.
[29] *ibid.*
[30] *ibid.*, pp. 19–20.
[31] *ibid.*, p. 18.
[32] RDC Acc. No. Rela/10359, p. 81.

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> demarcated . . . However, we cannot say that there will be no problems in implementing this Agreement between Menelik II and the Italian government, because (1) for instance, some places are clearly demarcated on the map but not clearly demarcated on the ground, and (2) moreover, in the agreement . . . some places are recognised as belonging to either Eritrea or Ethiopia, but again the area may not be found in the respective country as it is stated in the agreement.[33]

It was the belief of the TPLF, nonetheless, 'that such problems can be solved in the spirit of negotiation'. Ultimately, the Tigrayans declared with some prescience, neither the TPLF nor the EPLF would be responsible for resolving the boundary issue, but rather 'an internationally recognised body . . . will decide based on historical documents'.[34]

To a very real degree, the problematic relationship between Eritrea and Tigray, as represented by the EPLF and the TPLF, reflected the difficulties both sides had in defining themselves, although in the context of liberation war the Eritreans had, perhaps, a rather more straightforward task than the Tigrayans. For much of its early history, the TPLF had toyed with the idea of an independent Tigrayan republic, drawing—as the EPLF also did—on a selective interpretation of the past. But what exactly did the movement have in mind? Again, what was Tigray to be without Eritrea? Although the notion of Tigrayan independence was rejected by the EPLF, it seems possible to speculate that the TPLF had in fact originally envisaged, at least implicitly, some degree of unity with Eritrea. Talk of Tigrinya-speaking unity, noted earlier, was certainly strongly suggestive of this, and echoed similar ideas current in the 1940s (Alemseged Abbay, 1998). Only some form of Tigray–Tigrinya unity would have justified the desire for an independent Tigray (Gilkes, 1983: 205–6). TPLF rhetoric supporting the Eritrean cause, while simultaneously claiming to have 'persuaded' the Ethiopian people of the righteousness of that cause, may also, in origin, have been part of the same thought-process. It seems possible to suggest that initially the TPLF had looked northward for its political destiny; the stance of the EPLF forced the Tigrayans to avert their gaze. The EPLF was clearly not interested, and effectively told the TPLF to look southward instead, to fight for Ethiopia, although it is also possible that the TPLF would have claimed the Ethiopian inheritance in any case, in the course of time. It is certainly the case that, as events proved, the Tigrayans proved themselves unable to resist that inheritance once it was within their grasp (Ruth Iyob, 2000: 677; Young, 1998: 50). Once rebuffed by the Eritreans, the TPLF, already made conscious of the territorial vulnerability of Tigray through the activities of the ELF,

[33] *ibid.*, pp. 81–2.
[34] *ibid.*

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began to insist on 'demarcation' of boundaries, an issue which was, and is, secondary to that of nationality and identity, issues which have more profoundly shaped the political destiny of the region. The nature of Eritrea's struggle, as represented by the EPLF, fundamentally altered that destiny: it was a rejection of everything that had come before, the carving of a new path in terms of regional identities. As Pool has argued, the EPLF's shaping of Eritrean nationalism 'disconnected . . . Christian highlanders from the Christian Ethiopian empire, and Muslims from the neighbouring Arab Islamic world and its culture' (Pool, 1998: 21). For Tigray, perhaps, it could all have been very different.

FROM RIFT TO LIBERATION, TO MORE MODERN MEMORY AND INTERPRETATION

In the middle of 1985, relations were severed more or less completely. The EPLF's decision to remain silent on matters which the Tigrayans wanted to debate 'publicly' was taken as something of an insult, further evidence of an Eritrean superiority complex and of the perceived tendency of the EPLF to refuse to accept their Tigrayan counterparts as equals (Young, 1996: 116).[35] The formal rift endured over the next three years as the two liberation movements pursued their separate wars against a faltering *Derg* regime (Clapham, 1988: 212). By the time contact was re-established and co-operation was resumed in 1988, the writing was already beginning to appear on the wall for Mengistu's increasingly beleaguered state; but so it was too for future relations between the liberation movements whose military victories by that time had awarded them prospects for government. Even when *détente* came, core differences were glossed over and publicly ignored (Young, 1996: 117). In March 1988 the EPLF achieved remarkable success at the battle of Afabet in northern Eritrea, from which point the Ethiopian army was on the defensive. In February 1989, with the help of Eritrean forces, the TPLF captured Shire in Tigray, virtually wiping the Ethiopian army from the province. Within two years, the newly formed EPRDF alliance, dominated by the TPLF and to which several EPLF units were seconded, was advancing on Addis Ababa. All appeared to be going to the Eritreans' plan, while the Tigrayans themselves seemed to have realised their role within the broader Ethiopian arena.[36] Yet the

[35] Foreign Relations Bureau of the TPLF: 'On Our Differences With The EPLF' (1986): RDC Acc. No. 2399, p. 3.

[36] Even so, the EPLF was disgusted by the fact that a number of TPLF fighters abandoned the fight once Tigray was liberated, believing that their objective had been achieved. For the EPLF, this was evidence of the Tigrayans' ignorance of strategic necessities; for the TPLF themselves, it demonstrated the movement's democratic character.

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fundamental contradiction which lay at the heart of the Eritrean–Tigrayan alliance had not been resolved.

Many, both foreign observers and Eritreans themselves, appeared to want to forget the deep divisions of the past, or else were indeed wholly ignorant of them. Roy Pateman, who was well acquainted with the Eritrean struggle, asserted on the eve of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war that '[t]here are no military threats from Ethiopia while the Tigrayan dominated EPRDF government remains in power in Addis Ababa' (Pateman, 1998: 264). It is perhaps worthy of note that a virtually solitary warning signal came not from anyone studying the Eritrean side but from, again, John Young, who in the mid-1990s cautioned that '[p]olitical differences between the TPLF and the EPLF during their years of struggle will be reflected in their . . . future relations, and as a result they may be far more problematic than is generally imagined' (Young, 1996: 120). There is a lesson here from which all of us can learn, in terms of the value of remaining circumspect; but it is also clear that even someone such as Pateman, who had been studying the Eritrean struggle for several years, had overlooked the significance of the differences between the Eritreans and the Tigrayans, differences which he himself had earlier acknowledged (Pateman, 1998: 126). But he was certainly not alone among Eritrea-watchers or indeed Eritreans themselves in terms of choosing to see a bright future. While those writing on the Tigrayan dimension, or on the struggles of the region as a whole, generally placed due emphasis on the Eritrean–Tigrayan relationship, those concerned more or less exclusively with Eritrea tended to overlook it, perhaps, indeed, taking their cue from the public priorities set out by the EPLF itself.

Fairly representative of this vein was the essay by Amare Tekle published in 1994, in which the writer pointed toward the 'special relationship' between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Amare asserted that despite 'significant differences', the two countries 'share certain similarities in their historical antecedents, evince common socio-cultural perceptions and encounter the same socio-economic problems' (Amare Tekle, 1994: 2). Unity in the past was 'forced and unequal', but now there should be forgiving and forgetting, and indeed good relations between the two countries could ultimately lead to a more equitable and mutually beneficial union. Eritreans and Ethiopians should seek to create

> common institutions and processes which will mutually promote loose alliances guaranteeing peaceful co-existence and mutual security but which will progressively be transformed into a confederation ensuring common policies on security and international political affairs. This, it is hoped, will be followed by a federation which secures political unity . . . The two sides will progressively surrender part of their sovereignty to the common political organisation thus created at every stage. [*op. cit.*: 17]

This general concept, hopelessly idealistic though it may seem with hindsight, was encapsulated within the agreements being signed

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between the Eritrean and Ethiopian governments as early as 1993, and the public pronouncements which accompanied them.[37] As Ruth Iyob (2000: 671) has suggested, this was a period characterised by 'a fluidity in political thinking'. To some, it must have seemed like the most spectacular of political gymnastics.

Memory lost, if that is indeed what it was, swiftly became memory regained. This brings us back to the perceptions recorded at the beginning of the article. The views of the distinguished Amare Tekle need to be contrasted with the recollections of Eritrean soldiers, all EPLF veterans, on the ground, after the war between the two countries had reached its destructive peak:

> During 1997, the *Woyane* authorities did not send soldiers directly, but rather militia, coming into Eritrean territory and telling farmers that this is Tigray . . . The Tigrayan people around the contested areas did not take their own initiative, but were directed by the *Woyane* government, who compelled them to commit atrocities and spread destruction. For example, once Tigrayan villagers came in buses . . . crossed the border, came to the Eritrean village, and told the villagers, 'This is not your area, go and tell your government it does not belong to you.' This was in Badme in 1997. Tigrayans and Eritreans around the border were engaged in trade, mutual activities; but the Tigrayan authorities told people to do what the militia was doing, destroying the harvest and so on. It was deliberately done, ordered by government. This was done in order to terrorise the Eritrean people, in other words to turn the Eritrean people against their own government.[38]

The perception on the ground that the eruption of war in 1998 was wholly predictable is further underlined:

> . . . right from the beginning of the conflict, although Ethiopia called it a 'border conflict', it has been clear to me that Ethiopia would go beyond it. I was in the border areas before May 1998; Tigrayans were committing atrocities against Eritreans. For me it was clear that the Woyane wanted to overthrow the Eritrean government and replace it with a satellite. I knew this all along. I was in Badme before May 1998. I was there when the Tigrayans

[37] See for example 'Joint Communique of the First Round-Table Meeting of the Ethio-Eritrea Joint Ministeral Commission, 22–27 September 1993, Asmara', and 'Extract from Final Report of the Joint Review Committee on the Implementation of the Ethio-Eritrea Economic Agreements, Addis Ababa, 1 January 1997', Appendices 1 and 2 in Tekeste and Tronvoll (2000: 105–14). Several years earlier, indeed, the EPLF had talked of possible future 'confederation' as a means of dealing with the problem of an ethnic group which straddled both countries, although the concept of 'confederation' was not at that time elaborated upon (RDC Acc. No. 05062/Rela/3, pp. 20-1; see also the *Eritrea Profile* newspaper from 1994 onwards, *passim*.).

[38] Interviewed by the author: Simon Berhane, Adi Nefas, Eritrea, 20 July 2000. It is a matter of some debate whether these kinds of activities were instigated autonomously by local authorities, or whether they actually were directed by central government. In any case, the informant is referring here to the arrival of Tigrayan militia in the Badme area in July 1997, as they also did in the area of Bada (Adi Murug) at the same time. This led to the first exchange of letters, mild in tone, between the Eritrean President and Ethiopian Prime Minister. See Appendix 3 in Tekeste and Tronvoll (2000: 115–6).

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were crossing the border in 1997, when the Tigrayans were removing the harvest and expelling Eritrean farmers.[39]

For sure, the strength of emotion of these assertions to a very large degree reflects the anger felt at the full-scale Ethiopian invasion in May 2000 and, subsequently, the serious military setbacks suffered by the Eritrean army. Readers may also, if they choose, ignore the anti-Ethiopian remarks. But the essential point here is to emphasise the degree to which misunderstandings and tensions were seen to be commonplace in the areas which, as we have described, had been disputed since the late 1970s. While clearly the informants themselves will naturally have chosen to direct their anger at the Ethiopian government, the author again sensed that underlying this outward emotion was anger at the failure of the Eritrean government to resolve these problems before they became as catastrophic as they did between 1998 and 2000. Perhaps we can extend this outwards, and consider more broadly the frustration that many ordinary Eritreans will have felt in terms of the problematic relationship with their southerly neighbours in its entirety.

Some had longer memories than others, as is underlined by one EPLF veteran who was with the TPLF in Addis Ababa in 1991:

I met some Tigrayan friends whom I had known in Sahel, and I was able to observe their feelings toward Eritrea. They were saying, 'We have control of Ethiopia, but we are landlocked, we need a port . . . Once we are stabilised, our focus will be on Eritrea, we will get a port, and Ethiopia will be the strongest country in Africa.' So this is not a border dispute. From my point of view, before May 1998, Tigrayan atrocities and incursions were laying the foundations for later aggression. A border conflict is easy to solve according to colonial maps. The Tigrayan aim, rather, is to invade and control Eritrea, overthrow the government.[40]

Ultimately, the questions of nationality and regional identity have primacy as well as deep roots; the question of borders is secondary to, although clearly a reflection of, these unresolved issues.[41]

SOME CONCLUSIONS

The study of relations between Eritrea and Tigray reveals much about the current and historical relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia

[39] Interview by the author: Battalion Commander (name withheld on request), Adi Nefas, Eritrea, 19 July 2000.

[40] Interviewed by the author: Simon Berhane, Adi Nefas, Eritrea, 20 July 2000.

[41] It is worth noting that the idea that border problems were secondary to the larger issue of Eritrean–Ethiopian relations was reiterated by a number of Ethiopian prisoners of war, Tigrayan and non-Tigrayan, interviewed by the author in September 2000. These sources, of course, cannot be regarded as wholly reliable: although the author endeavoured to conduct the interviews in as scientific a manner as was possible under the unusual circumstances, an Eritrean army officer was always present.

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more generally, and goes some way to shedding light on the 1998–2000 war between the two countries. It seems reasonable to suppose that, had the incidents of May 1998 never happened, the wider relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia would have remained, at least for a time, largely outside scrutiny. It is now a matter of some urgency, and not only because of the ferocity and intensity of the war which has recently abated. It is also important because it seems that the war itself was misunderstood, misinterpreted and swamped in unhelpful clichés, deliberately or through sheer ignorance divorced from a past which is still very much the present in both countries. Professions of either naïvety or cynicism among Eritreans with regard to their southerly neighbours are a reflection of the misunderstandings which have characterised the relationship in the past, continue to plague the relationship today, and which will, in all probability, define relations for some time to come. If interaction has been troubled in the past, recent events will only have exacerbated these problems. While they may be resolved, to some degree, by the passing of time alone, other things remaining equal, it is nonetheless very likely that serious and conscious efforts will need to be made on both sides to bridge the divide. It must also be pointed out that, as far as Eritrea is concerned, the presumed unpredictability of relations with Ethiopia has had a truly detrimental domestic impact, with Eritrean society now militarised to a saddening and deeply damaging degree. The siege mentality which served the EPLF well in the field has now solidified in government, no doubt in part owing to the organisation's peculiarly solipsistic ethos, but equally stemming from a long and troubled history with the country's southerly neighbour.

Much of what has been discussed in this paper raises the question of the degree of 'inevitability' which attended the outbreak of war in 1998, and indeed the problematic nature of the relationship in the liberation war era and of Eritrean–Tigrayan relations more broadly. Could things, crudely put, have been different? On one level, the question might be, why did the struggle against the *Derg* across the whole of what was then northern Ethiopia prove fissiparous? Part of the answer lies in the nature of Eritrea as a territorial entity, namely, its distinctly colonial, un-Ethiopian history and the identity (or identities) which that past had engendered, as first clearly expressed in the 1940s; and the other part of the answer lies in the EPLF itself. From the Ethiopian point of view, the EPLF hijacked history: the movement recognised quite swiftly that only a powerful strain of intransigence could get them where they wanted to go, namely, complete and unconditional Eritrean independence. The resoluteness of the Eritrean struggle contrasts with the much more equivocal, and in many ways much more difficult, position of the TPLF in Ethiopia. Both were products of their respective modern geopolitical and historical environments; their physical adjacency and cultural commonality, reflecting a deeper shared history, have only tended to blur our vision of more modern realities and positions. In other words, it essentially misses the point to regard the struggle, and relations more broadly, as 'fissiparous'. These were different wars: the Eritreans' war

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was not that of Tigray, nor was the Tigrayans' war that of Eritrea. It never was, nor, as long as the EPLF's vision of Eritrea prevailed, could it ever be. This made it 'easier', if we can use the word, when it came to fighting each other; and perhaps, to some degree, given that the guidelines of non-negotiability had already been laid down during the liberation war, compromise was slow to make an appearance when war came again in 1998. Our new question should be, finally, not 'could it have been different?' but 'could it happen elsewhere in Africa?' For, although the identities examined here are products of the unique crucible that is the Horn, forged in the first instance within the Ethiopian empire or at least in the long shadows of that empire, the events of this region are perhaps chilling reminders of what might have been, and might yet be, elsewhere: uncompromising nationalism, sensitivities heightened to the point of hysteria, local and regional histories made and in the making, wars over the past as much as the present.

While problems over boundaries, festering as they have done over the past two decades or more, can be seen to have been the catalyst for conflict, they should also be seen as having been secondary in importance to the much larger and more explosive questions of nationality, ethnicity and unity. As Eritreans have repeatedly claimed, borders can easily be demarcated and the problem promptly removed (even though the EPLF demurred on this during the liberation struggle). But they have simultaneously been aware that this is not, and never has been, the core issue, which is precisely why they found themselves at war. By this token, the war of 1998–2000 might have been anticipated; indeed, one may safely assume that in fact it was, but by individuals whose positions in public life (however inappropriate that term may be in the context of the secrecy and conservatism of Eritrean and Ethiopian politics) prevented them from saying so, even while these same positions should have empowered the individuals themselves to pre-empt its outbreak. These errors of judgement, if this is indeed how we can intepret them, cannot be undone. While some might argue that some form of armed conflict was in fact necessary in the shaping of regional identities—in the confirmation of Eritrean independence, but by the same token in a serious modification to the dangerous myth of Eritrean military invincibility—it should now be clear that any future conflict, which cannot be completely ruled out, would be wholly futile. Neither side stands to gain; on the contrary, both EPLF and TPLF might find their internal power-bases significantly weakened, which would be an ironic conclusion indeed to this entire saga. It would not, however, be the end of the story.

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APPENDIX

NOTE: This is intended as a brief guide to terms, names and background history for non-specialist readers.

Derg. Amharic for 'committee'. It became the popular name for the post-imperial and supposedly Marxist Ethiopian regime which lasted from 1974, when Emperor Haile Sellassie was deposed, until 1991 when it collapsed with the arrival in Addis Ababa of EPRDF and EPLF forces. Initially, the *Derg* was officially known as the Provisional Military Administration Council (PMAC) and, later, the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE). From 1977 until 1991, the head of the *Derg* and dictator of Ethiopia was Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam. Mengistu refused to contemplate a negotiated settlement to the Eritrean or any other question related to 'secession' or autonomy, and presided over several major military offensives against both EPLF and TPLF, with Soviet assistance, from the late 1970s through to the mid-1980s. See also 'Strategic withdrawal' below.

ELF. The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) was the first movement of armed resistance during the Eritrean liberation struggle, initiating guerrilla war against imperial Ethiopia in September 1961 as the armed wing of the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM), which was in exile. Predominantly Muslim and based in the western lowlands, it nonetheless attracted a number of highland Christian recruits by the end of the 1960s, including a core of future leaders of the EPLF. Religious, organisational and ideological tensions within the ELF, however, led to the breakaway of several—predominantly Christian-led—groups at the beginning of the 1970s; a number of these later amalgamated to form the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) by 1974. The ELF and EPLF fought one another sporadically through the 1970s, although there were also periods of cease-fire and military co-operation. However, full-scale civil war between the movements erupted in earnest at the end of the 1970s, and led, by 1981, to the expulsion of the ELF from Eritrean soil. The ELF continued to function politically in exile, although it underwent further fragmentation in the decade prior to independence, with some former members joining the EPLF as late as 1990. Today, members of the former ELF live both in Eritrea and in exile in Europe and North America, where some of them purport to represent opposition to the current Eritrean government.

EPLF. Formed by an amalgam of disenchanted former members of the ELF in the early 1970s, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) was predominantly led by, and composed of, Tigrinya-speaking highland Christians but also sought to recruit beyond the highland provinces of Eritrea. Purportedly secular, it adopted Marxist rhetoric (and a number of apparently Marxist policies) in its early years, and sought to bring about a popular and inclusive revolution, regarding campaigns in health care and literacy programmes in rural areas as part and parcel of that revolution, alongside the physical struggle with Ethiopian 'colonialism'. Structured according to the principles of

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democratic centralism, it was a highly disciplined and remarkably effective military, social and political force; it succeeded in expelling its older rival, the ELF, from the field by 1981, securing for itself the position of the sole movement representing the Eritrean people inside Eritrea. After its strategic withdrawal (see below) to the north of Eritrea in the late 1970s, it survived several fierce Ethiopian offensives before going on the offensive in the mid-1980s, combining both guerrilla and conventional means of warfare. The EPLF broke out of its northern stronghold in 1988 with the capture of the town of Afabet, and in the next two years overran much of the country with the exception of several besieged Ethiopian urban garrisons; in 1991 it entered Asmara, simultaneously assisting the TPLF in the capture of Addis Ababa, and set up the Provisional Government of Eritrea. Having overseen a resoundingly successful referendum for Eritrean independence in 1993, the following year it reformulated itself as the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), which is the EPLF in all but name. The PFDJ remains the sole legal, and of course ruling, party in Eritrea, while almost all members of the Eritrean government, from the President downward, are former EPLF fighters.

EPRDF. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) was the name given to the umbrella organisation which allied the TPLF with a myriad of other anti-*Derg* movements, representing a broad spectrum of opinion, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, at the end of the 1980s. EPRDF forces captured Addis Ababa, only days after the EPLF had entered Asmara, in 1991 and the movement became the basis for the new coalition government of Ethiopia.

EPRP. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) emerged in the mid-1970s as one of the main opposition movements against the *Derg*, and one of the most radical, advocating popular elections, mobilising both peasantry and proletariat, and accepting in principle the right of secession. However the movement argued that it would be preferable for the peoples of Ethiopia to unite and construct a nation organised around cultural autonomy. Relations with the TPLF were tense—indeed the TPLF prohibited the EPRP from operating inside Tigray—but some military assistance came from the EPLF. The movement was quickly crushed by the *Derg*, with the connivance of some rival opposition groups distrustful of its ideology, although some members scattered into other movements.

Strategic withdrawal. A pivotal point in the history of the Eritrean liberation struggle, this refers to the decision by the EPLF leadership to withdraw its forces from their positions across central and southern Eritrea to the northern mountains in the province of Sahel. The decision was taken in the face of new Soviet-backed Ethiopian offensives from 1977 to 1979. While it involved abandoning positions which had been held for several years, and which had seemed to promise the imminent liberation of Eritrea, the withdrawal to an almost

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impenetrable rear base undoubtedly saved the EPLF from almost certain destruction as a fighting force.

Tigray. The northernmost province of Ethiopia, inhabited by predominantly Tigrinya (see below) speaking people, and therefore sharing much in the way of culture, language and history with adjacent highland Eritrea. Tigray is presented in much of the literature on the region as forming the historic heartland of ancient 'Abyssinia', although in recent centuries it has become increasingly marginal to the Amhara-dominated power centres to the south, Emperor Yohannes IV (1872–89) being its last 'Abyssinian' ruler (and the first for some time before that). This, indeed, is one of the core themes running through modern Tigrayan nationalism, which first makes an appearance in the 1940s but which becomes much more forceful in the 1970s with the rise of the TPLF (see below). One of the key dilemmas for Tigrayan nationalist leaders, reflecting in some ways its disadvantageous position within the modern Ethiopian state, has been the question of whether to press for outright independence, or to reclaim its 'rightful' status inside Ethiopia. Given the close relationship between the two regions, either of these options has been bound to have a major impact on Eritrea.

Tigrinya. The dominant language of highland Eritrea and much of Tigray, and therefore shared by the EPLF and the TPLF. The term can also be used to refer to culture and custom in the same areas.

TLF. An early Tigrayan nationalist movement, the Tigray Liberation Front (TLF) was linked to the ELF but was too weak and ill-organised to survive subsequent ELF–EPLF–TPLF machinations in the mid- and late-1970s. The TPLF was swift to crush the movement, expelling some members and absorbing others.

TPLF. The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front emerged in 1974–5, and enjoyed support from the EPLF. By the late 1970s it was the dominant movement in Tigrayan nationalist politics, having largely cleared the field of both local and pan-Ethiopian rivals. A primarily guerrilla movement, generally eschewing conventional warfare until the late 1980s, it was deeply rooted in the Tigrayan peasantry although its leaders were mostly middle class and educated and, like the EPLF, dabbled in Marxism in thought if not always in deed. It grew in military strength and political confidence and by the late 1980s had come to regard itself as in the vanguard of a popular Ethiopian revolution. By this time it had cleared Ethiopian forces from Tigray, and was instrumental in the formation of the broad coalition EPRDF (see above), in which the TPLF itself was dominant. This movement captured Addis Ababa in 1991 and the TPLF was positioned at the heart of the new government charged with the reconstruction of Ethiopia. It remains a dominant part of the coalition government.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the problematic relationship between Eritrea and Tigray as represented by the Eritrean and Tigray Peoples' Liberation Fronts. The EPLF won independence for Eritrea in 1991, at the same time as the TPLF seized power in Ethiopia; the two movements had had a difficult relationship, beginning in the mid-1970s, during their respective armed struggles, and the issues which had caused disagreement remained unresolved as the movements made the transition to government. This paper examines the nature of those issues and the degree to which the war of 1998–2000 between the two countries can be seen to have reflected much older tensions and indeed contradictions in the Eritrean–Tigrayan/Ethiopian relationship. Thus, the paper begins with an overview of Eritrean opinion, during the recent war, about the relationship in question, and then moves back in time to the era of the liberation struggle. Here, the author attempts to explain the complexities of the respective Eritrean and Tigrayan revolutions insofar as each impinged on and influenced the other, with particular reference to the issues of frontiers, nationality and ethnicity, and sovereignty. The paper, finally, considers the apparent paradoxes in the perceptions which Eritreans have of Tigray and Ethiopia, and suggests that changes in attitude are necessary on both sides of the Mereb river border if the relationship is not to be defined by perpetual confrontation.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine la relation problématique entre l'Erythrée et le Tigray, tel que les représentent l'EPLF et le TPLF. L'EPLF (Front populaire de libération de l'Erythrée) a obtenu l'indépendance de l'Erythrée en 1991, au moment où le TPLF (Front populaire de libération du Tigray) prenait le pouvoir en Ethiopie ; dès le milieu des années 1970, ces deux mouvements ont entretenu des rapports difficiles durant leurs luttes armées respectives, et les objets de désaccord étaient toujours irrésolus au moment où ces mouvements sont arrivés au pouvoir. Cet article examine la nature de ces désaccords et dans quelle mesure la guerre de 1998–2000 entre les deux pays a pu refléter des

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tensions beaucoup plus anciennes et des contradictions dans la relation Erythrée–Tigray/Ethiopie. L'article commence par étudier l'opinion érythréenne sur la relation en question au cours de la récente guerre, puis remonte jusqu' à la période de la lutte pour la libération. L'auteur tente d'expliquer la complexité des révolutions érythréenne et tigréenne dans la mesure où chacune affecte et influence l'autre, concernant notamment les problèmes de frontières, de nationalité et ethnicité, et de souveraineté. Pour finir, l'article évoque les paradoxes apparents de l'idée que se font les Erythréens du Tigray et de l'Ethiopie, et suggère qu'un changement de comportement devra s'opérer de part et d'autre du Mereb, fleuve frontière, pour que la relation cesse de se définir par une confrontation perpétuelle.

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