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The Trans-Mareb Past in the Present

by ALEMSEGED ABBAY*

The beast lives unhistorically; for it 'goes into' the present, like a number, without leaving any curious remainder… But man is always resisting the great and continually increasing weight of the past; it presses him down and bows his shoulders.
– Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History* (Indianapolis, 1949), p. 5.

If the past is 'dead', it dances, a lively corpse indeed, on new graves everywhere almost every day in whatever kind of time.
– Harold Isaacs, *Idols of the Tribe* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), p. 121.

THE past has a social purpose of stressing the virtues of courage, endurance, and sacrifice. Picturesque folkloric characters such as Robin Hood and Nicholas Chauvin become models for selflessness and patriotism. The term *chauvinisme*, which appeared in France by the 1840s, for instance, did not carry any negative connotations. Instead, it helped the nation-state to inculcate a sense of oneness in its people, who began to say '*Nouns sommes tous français*, *Chauvin*'. The past, thus, has a double mission. It is both therapeutic and vital political ammunition.

HISTORY AS A THERAPY

With its sacred aspirations, the past turns people towards the future. It encourages them to persevere with life, kindling hopes that a brighter future is around the corner. Memory of a golden past assures them of new opportunities, however unrealistic. Current conditions are interlinked with 'the remembered present: memory is always derived from the *present* and from the contents of the present'.[1]

Now an international line, the Mareb River divides the Tigrinya-speaking people into those who live in either Eritrea or Tigray, northern Ethiopia. Yet, they share more or less the same collective memory. The trans-Mareb past starts with the myth of the union of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, based on the Old Testament's narrative of the Queen's visit to Jerusalem in the tenth century B.C. in order to test the King's wisdom. Having been impregnated by

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[1] Amos Funkenstein, 'Collective Memory and Historical Consciousness', in *History and Memory* (Tel Aviv), 1, 1, Spring 1989, p. 9.

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Solomon, she gave birth to Minilik in *Kebessa* (the Eritrean highlands) on her way back home,[2] and when the boy grew up, so the legend goes, he went to see his father in Jerusalem and returned with the Ark of the Covenant which is believed to be in Axum, Tigray. This myth is a 'lively corpse' that has been dancing in the region for generations. Such stories serve as paradigms for identity and modes of life,[3] and have been nourishing a distinct political history in the trans-Mareb.[4]

REMEMBERED POLITICAL DRAMAS

The trans-Mareb feudalists assumed primacy over their Amhara counterparts during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when Yohannes IV's most trusted general, *Ra'esi* Alula, left a lasting name by defeating the Egyptians at Gundet (1875) and Gura (1876), the Mahdists at Kufit (1885) and Italians at Dogali (1887), as well as by relieving the Anglo–Egyptian garrisons from entrapments by the Mahdists in eastern Sudan (1884), and by playing a vital rôle at Adua (1896) against the Italians. Writing in 1901, Augustus Wylde claimed that those victories made Alula 'the best general and strategist that Africa had perhaps produced in modern times'.[5]

As governor of *Kebessa*, Alula made the village of Asmara his capital, from where he brought tranquillity to a hitherto conflict-ridden region by ruling 'without firing' for 12 years until Italy came to make it the core of 'Eritrea'.[6] *Pax Alula*, which inaugurated *Kebessa*'s golden age,

[2] Johannes Kolmodin, *Traditions de Tsazzega et Hazzega* (Uppsala, 1915), paras. 1–14, first published in *Archives d'études orientale* (Rome), 9, 1, 1912.

[3] Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York, 1963), pp. 1–12. The part played by myth in the socio-political life of the people was so vital that the Amhara Emperors claimed direct descent from Sheba and Solomon. Using this story as political ammunition for legitimising his rule, Haile Selassie, the 'lion of Judah', claimed he was the 251st in the 'Solomoni' line. It would be as nonsensical to try to establish the genealogical veracity of such claims as 'to dig the ashes of Sheba' to find out who exactly she was, and where she reigned. Irrespective of the historicity of the Queen, the therapeutic significance of her legend echoes on both sides of the Red Sea. In Yemen, as in the trans-Mareb, people talk about her as if she was there yesterday morning. See, for instance, Michael Binyon, 'Yemen tests wisdom of a Solomon with claim to Queen of Sheba', and Philip Howard, 'That African Queen is causing trouble again', in *The Times* (London), 9 May 1997.

[4] Stephen Longrigg (BMA, Asmara) to Chief Civil Affairs Officer (GHQ, MEF, Cairo), 12 August 1943; London, War Office Records, 230–168.

[5] Augustus B. Wylde, *Modern Abyssinia* (London, 1901), p. 20. *Ra'esi* Alula received numerous praises from contemporary Western observers, including Gerald H. Portal, *My Mission to Abyssinia* (London, 1892); G. F. H. Berkeley, *The Campaign of Adowa and the Rise of Menelik* [1902] (London, 1935); William Dye, *Moslem Egypt and Christian Abyssinia* [1880] (New York, 1969); and William Winstanley, *A Visit to Abyssinia* [1881] (New York, 1969).

[6] Kennedy Travaskis, 'The Hamasien… A Social Survey', in Trevaskis Papers, 1944, Eritrea, p. 73; Bodleian Library, Oxford, Mss-Brit-Emp-S. 367, Boxes 1–2, 1944–51.

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demanded the removal of the intermittently recalcitrant *Ra'esi* Walde-Mika'el Solomon, who ravaged many areas including *Kebessa*, to which he laid hereditary claim.[7] A priest there described this chief as 'a fratricide and a parricide' because of his brutishness,[8] and that was why Walde-Mika'el was known as 'Gomida' ('chopper'). Nor did he earn any respect in the region after being made 'Ferik Pacha' by the Egyptians. Called 'Mika'el Pacha', in reference to this treachery,[9] he was further contemptuously nicknamed '*Ra'esi* Ali' in *Kebessa*.[10] Finally captured and exiled to Axum, the home of *Ra'esi* Mika'el Suhul (king-maker in Ethiopia, 1769–80), from whom he claimed descent, Walde-Mika'el married an Axumite and lived quietly until his death in 1906.

Walde-Mika'el's brutality remained abhorred when remembered by the inhabitants of *Kebessa*, his submission to the Egyptians scorned, and his surrender to Alula 'without firing' ridiculed as cowardly. Instead, it was his vanquisher who has been praised in the folklore for bravery:

[And you] Alula 'Abba Chago',	*Alulaye Abba Chago*
Everyone coveted your sword	*Goradeyeka sab bahago*
You made them bewail like women	*Kem anesti asrahkayom heringo*
You ruled what the coward	
[Walde-Mika'el] abandoned.	*Gaza'ekayo ferah zahadego*.[11]

Other influential leaders included *Ra'esi* Araya Dimtsu, the Emperor's uncle, who was governor of Akkale Guzai, one of the three districts of *Kebessa*. His son, Debbab Araya, became particularly effective as a rebel against the Emperor, roaming freely to Habab and to Semhar,[12] and but for being killed in 1891 it is not certain whether Akkale Guzai would have belonged to him or Bahta Hagos, who managed to carve out a political niche in the region until his death in 1894. In whatever capacity, Araya Dimtsu and Debbab were at home north of the Mareb, since there was no boundary separating the two halves of the trans-Mareb Tigray.

Bahta, a native of Akkale Guzai, also rebelled against Yohannes, but did not try to create a coalition of *Kebessa* chiefs because he had no sense of an identity separate from that of the Tigrayans south of the Mareb, being motivated by nothing other than a

[7] Winstanley, op. cit. p. 213, and Wylde, op. cit. p. 28.
[8] Dye, op. cit. p. 285. For similar descriptions, see Wylde, op. cit. p. 30, and Longrigg, op. cit. pp. 101 and 111.
[9] Dye, op. cit. pp. 285–6.
[10] Trevaskis Papers, op. cit. p. 71.
[11] Kolmodin, op. cit. para. 197.
[12] Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and Eritrea During the Scramble for Africa: a political biography of Ras Alula, 1875–1897* (East Lansing, MI, 1982), pp. 35 and 53.

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personal vendetta and feud with the family of Araya Dimtsu. And during his rebellion in 1894 against the Italians, who were told that Ethiopia was greater than their own country,[13] Bahta regarded the 'black snakes' south of the Mareb as his natural allies. As his following warning indicates, he only worried about the 'white snakes':

Sengel, my brother, do not be fooled	*Sengel haway yemana ayti'ashu*
If a white snake bites,	*tsa'eda taman ente'de'a nekisu*
there is no medicine for it.	*da'la'lika ayirekebin fewsu*.[14]

As Walde-Ab Walde Mariam remarked when interviewed in 1987 by the EPLF in a liberated area (he was to be crowned with the prestigious title of 'Father of Eritrea' after four decades of exiled life and determined struggle for independence), Bahta's messages for support were all sent to Tigray, instead of other parts of Eritrea.[15] After the rebellion was crushed, his brother Sengel fled south of the Mareb, and the Tigrayan governor, *Ra'esi* Mengesha Yohannes, refused to extradite him to Eritrea.[16] Akkale Guzai's relations with Tigray across the new border were a lot closer than those with the other *Kebessa* districts of Seraye and Hamasien.

THE PAST IN POST-ITALIAN ERITREA

The Italian administration was segregationist, *par excellence*, having 'separate windows at post offices, separate seats in buses and separate taxis',[17] and Eritreans had very little access to education.[18] Indeed, in 1941, the British could not find any who they felt were capable of holding administrative responsibilities, according to the last British Governor of Eritrea.[19] Colonialism, therefore, had failed to create a

[13] Berkeley, op. cit. p. 64.

[14] This dictum generally attributed to Bahta Hagos was actually a refrain of a song which expressed fear and hatred of white men all over Ethiopia from Shewa to *Kebessa*; namely, 'Of a black snake's bite you may be cured, but from a bite of a white snake you will never recover'. *Mémoires d'Afrique* (Paris, 1899) by the former Italian Governor of Eritrea, General O. Baratieri, cited in Berkeley, op. cit. p. 61.

[15] Interview, Walde-Ab Walde-Mariam, Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), Orota, 31 August 1987.

[16] Longrigg, op. cit. pp. 123–6.

[17] 'Observations on Italian East Africa, based on a report by an American, Miss Lillian Schoedler', American Consulate, Nairobi, sent to the US Secretary of State, Washington, DC, 19 July 1940, p. 15.

[18] Interview, Walde-Ab Walde-Mariam, Research and Information Centre on Eritrea, Rome, 2 November 1982. His bitter feelings towards the Italians for discouraging education in Eritrea had been reported in Dispatch No. 361 from the American Legation in Addis Ababa to the US Secretary of State, Washington, DC, 20 March 1947. According to *Occupied Enemy Territory Administration, Eritrea. Half-Yearly Report* (Asmara), 1 July–31 December 1942, p. 38, only 300 Eritrean children were then receiving education (in the Swedish Mission School) as compared to 5,000 young Italians in private schools.

[19] Duncan Cumming, 'The U.N. Disposal of Eritrea', in *African Affairs* (London), 52, 207, April 1953.

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marked lacuna in the trans-Mareb sense of identity. Ancient myths and symbols endured as the sources of identity, and *Kebessa*'s 'traditional association with the Queen of Sheba and Minilik, her son by Solomon', was felt by the political adviser to the British Military Administration in Asmara, Kennedy Trevaskis, to be 'in themselves sufficient to have distinguished this part of the old Kingdom of Axum from its other provinces'.[20]

Kebessa's identification with Tigray was shaped by chains of traditions that resembled umbilical cords. In the post-Italian era, too, the region's recent history was still fresh. Those living in *Kebessa* looked back at Walde-Mika'el as the tyrant who had killed many of his own people,[21] whereas Alula was remembered for his sense of fairness. From Asmara, a British Governor learned, 'he kept the peace of his province and enforced justice. The territory breathed again after the long nightmare of civil war and the bloodthirsty reign of [Walde-Mika'el]'.[22] Fresh in the collective memory:

> One and all confirm that Ras Alula was a just ruler, well loved by the people, and that at no time in its history has the Hamasien been so tranquil or free from the interminable disputes which are today the characteristic features of its daily life.[23]

The British, who took trusteeship of Eritrea in 1941, allowed the inhabitants to form political parties and to discuss their fate in a free press. But few, if any, in *Kebessa* sought the independence of the former *colonia primogenita*. The only major party that was free of foreign hands wanted to create an independent or autonomous 'Tigray-Tigrignie' state with the slogan of 'Eritrea for Eritreans'. According to the Liberal Progressive Party (LPP), 'The geographic position' of Tigray, 'its culture, its history and its trading are a clear proof that Tigray is part of Eritrea – as it was before the Italian occupation of 1889 and in the years 1935–45'.[24] Criticising the Amhara monopoly of power in Ethiopia, the LPP praised the federal form of government that had been devised by Yohannes, who had not ruled by putting people from 'Tigray-Tigrignie' all over Ethiopia. Instead, he had crowned chiefs such as Minilik of Shewa and Takle-Haimanot of Gojjam as kings of

[20] Trevaskis Papers, op. cit. p. 1.
[21] Ibid. p. 71 and Longrigg, op. cit. p. 111.
[22] Longrigg, op. cit, p. 112.
[23] Trevaskis Papers, op. cit. p. 139.
[24] Liberal Progressive Party, 'Memorandum', in *Four Power Commission of Investigation for the Former Italian Colonies* (London, 1948), 'Report on Eritrea', Foreign Office, 371–69365. See also, *Degiat* Abraha Tessema's speech, in *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta* (Asmara), 13 March 1947, pp. 3–4.

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their respective regions. In short, Yohannes of 'Tigray-Tigrignie' had believed in power-sharing,[25] unlike the Amhara.

As Walde-ab Walde-Mariam explained in *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta* (Asmara), 28 November 1946: 'I do not have the desire to separate Eritreans from Tigrayans and Eritrea from Tigray. I have been struggling from deep down [in my heart] so that the two [peoples] and the two [regions] would not split'. Based on this 'oneness' with Tigray that 'even a foreigner cannot deny', every Tigrayan had the right to express opinions on Eritrean affairs. Walde-Ab highlighted the trans-Mareb ties by invoking Yohannes IV and Alula, 'who made wonderful history with their blood' in Eritrea.[26]

Lamenting the brutal suppression of the 1943 *Weyane* insurgency by the 'fascist Shewan régime', the LPP condemned the 'barbaric bombardment of our Tigrayan brethren. Since the dawn of history, the Shewans have always thought in terms of hurting those of us who are Tigrinya-speaking'.[27] The régime's atrocities during the *Weyane* were invoked as an argument against unity with Ethiopia, because the 'barbaric' Shewans would do to Eritrea what they did to Tigray.[28] Given that the trans-Mareb is a polity with its distinct territory, culture, language, and history, the identification of *Kebessa* with Tigray was hardly surprising. Nationalism was the order of the day, since as the British Military Administration reported for 1944:

> The bonds of sentiment which naturally bind the Tigres of Ethiopia and Eritrea affected the younger generation in Eritrea in a way which must be expected in these days when the principles of self-determination are popular throughout the democratic world.[29]

Clearly the sense of identity posed by the political leaders of *Kebessa* during the 1940s had been shaped by a common past. They revered the trans-Mareb 'heroes', notably Yohannes and Alula, his famous general and most judicious governor. For instance, Walde-Ab,

[25] *Degiat* Abraha Tessema, 'Teka'felti Ena' ['We Share', i.e. the agony of Tigrayans], in ibid. 28 November 1946, pp. 3–4.

[26] Walde-Ab Walde-Mariam, 'Bez'eba Ertra kezareb Massel zelewo de'a Menkon yekewun?', ['Then who have the Right to speak about Eritrea?'], in ibid. 28 November 1946. In a letter from Harold Courlander to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, c/o The American Consulate, Asmara, dated 22 March 1943, this 'foreigner' had confirmed the oneness of Tigray and *Kebessa*: 'Racially and culturally the populations of southern Eritrea and northern Abyssinia are similar as the people of Nebraska and Kansas.... They have more in common... than the Tigre people of Eritrea have... with the Barias and Cunamas in the Eritrean lowlands'.

[27] Gabre-Igzi Andom, 'Wegid Hasab Memeqiqal Adikan Barenat Shewa...' ['Shun the Idea of Dividing your Country and Shewan Slavery...'], in *Hanti Ertra* (Asmara), 18 February 1950, p. 2.

[28] Abbay Gabre-Abzgi, 'Chihemi Betsayka kelitses, Chihemika Mai le'kae' ['When the Beard of your Comrade is being shaved, wet your own Beard'], in ibid. 8 April 1950, p. 2.

[29] *British Military Administration of Eritrea*, *Annual Report* (Asmara), 1 January–31 December 1994, p. 8.

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in apparent appreciation, called his first son 'Alula', which has a trans-Mareb nationalist meaning though not a common name in the region.

What were the seeds of this 'We Remember' syndrome? Given their 'golden' past it had not been easy for the Tigrayan feudal élites to accept the loss of power to the Amhara in 1889. As Alula told an Italian journalist:

> This country is ours, and if we submitted to Minilik it is because we became very few after Metemmah…I have my master who is the son of King Giovanni [Yohannes], why should I look for another in Scioa?… Tigre can not be a servant of Scioa, because our people are soldiers, while the Shoans fight only against people armed with spears.[30]

Further, just as the Tigrayans in *Kebessa* felt betrayed by Minilik, '*nous restâmes perdue* (*aux mains de l'Italien*)',[31] so their leaders could not forgive the Amhara for acquiescing to the departure of the northern half of their region.[32] Gundet, Gura, Kufit, and Dogali, *inter alia*, where Tigrayans had shed their blood in defence of their country against outside forces, were now located in *l'Africa Orientale Italiana*. Unsurprisingly, Alula and his contemporaries had begun to think about independence for Tigray.[33]

HISTORY IN THE EYES OF THE PUBLIC

The past and present are a continuum of time for the inhabitants of the trans-Mareb, most of whom are still traditionalists. What exists in their collective memory remains as their point of reference, as I found while conducting a survey in Mendefera (*Kebessa*) and Axum (Tigray), in 1994. For the 28 civilians on each side of the Mareb that were interviewed with regard to their sense of identity, Eritrea and Tigray are integral parts of 'Tigray-Tigrignie'. According to two informants in Mendefera: 'That was what they used to be since the Axumite era',[34] and 'all the people who live in the region from the Takkeze River speak the same language. It means the same people with the same fate'.[35] Indeed, their traditions and manners, as in marriage or burial (*Sere'at*),[36] were shaped by the trans-Mareb frame of reference. Still in the pre-modern era, there were no significant 'boundary

[30] Cited in Haggai Erlich, *Ethiopia and the Challenge of Independence* (Boulder, CO, 1986), p. 42.
[31] Kolmodin, op. cit. para. 286.
[32] Ernest Work, *Ethiopia: a pawn in European diplomacy* (New York, 1935), p. 100.
[33] Berkeley, op. cit. p. 18.
[34] Interview, *Bashai* Abraha Berhane (aged 78), Mendefera, 12 July 1994.
[35] Loc. cit. Isaac Gabre-Hiwet (74).
[36] '*Sere'at*' is the trans-Mareb version of the pre-modern French notion of '*comme il faut*'. See Eugene Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen* (Stanford, 1976), p. 71.

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mechanisms', in the phraseology of John Armstrong,[37] to separate the people on the two sides of the Mareb. Their primordial sentiments were the primary shapers of their psychological ties.

The same heroes are shared by those who live on both sides of the Mareb. As Trevaskis had observed in the 1940s, and as my informants confirmed 50 years later, Alula has been remembered as their judicious ruler. Stanzas in varying sequences instantly and fondly stated the folk epic: 'Saintdom like that of Lalibela',[38] 'Longevity like that of Methuselah', 'Justice like that of Alula'. Walde-Mika'el, the *Kebessa* chief who had intermittent differences with the feudalists south of the Mareb, is also remembered with considerable pride. In a seeming contradiction, whereas 'one and all' explained why they regarded Alula as a hero, none could give reasons why Walde-Mika'el deserved that status. Only two of my informants had serious reservations: the oldest said that he 'was like a *shifta* [bandit]',[39] while the other was willing to call him a hero only because 'he fought at the battle of Gundet against the Egyptians as Yohannes's lieutenant'.[40] It looks as if the 30-year armed struggle that presented Walde-Mika'el as an Eritrean hero must have managed to dilute past hatred against him.

Few knew much about Bahta Hagos, who according to one of those interviewed in 1994 could not be called a hero because he 'vacillated a lot for personal reasons'.[41] Another was dismayed with the whole project of inventing heroes:

> It is amazing! As time passes every Eritrean is becoming a nationalist hero. And Bahta is one of them. He even descended to Massawa to welcome the Italian colonialists and guided them all the way to *Kebessa*. He identified with them and was converted to Catholicism. Finally, he rebelled against them only when administrative differences surfaced. He is not a hero![42]

As if Seraye and Akkale Guzai, two adjacent districts of *Kebessa*, were worlds apart, most informants said they knew little about Bahta because he was from Akkale Guzai. This situation was reminiscent of mid-nineteenth century France where, according to an observer, 'Every valley is still a little world that differs from a neighbouring world as Mercury does from Uranus. Every village is a clan, a sort of state with its own patriotism.'[43]

[37] John Armstrong, *Nations Before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1982), pp. 7–9.
[38] Lalibela has been elevated to a saintly status as the King in the twelfth century who built the rock-hewn churches in north-central Ethiopia.
[39] Interview, *Bashai* Gabre-Selassie Amanuel (94), Mendefera, 15 July 1994.
[40] Interview, Isaac Gabre-Hiwet.
[41] Interview, Negash Gabre-Ab (62), Mendefera, 15 July 1994.
[42] Interview, Isaac Gabre-Hiwet.
[43] Weber, op. cit. p. 47.

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In both *Kebessa* and Tigray, the past – the 'golden' era and the period of hardships – therapeutically assures people that they both came from, and are going, somewhere. The past gives the present 'the feeling of the tree that clings to its roots'.[44]

HISTORY AS AMMUNITION IN POLITICS

The disadvantaged and/or disgruntled need the past as valuable ammunition against the historiography of those they hold responsible for their plight, and seek not only therapy, but also identity and inspiration. The oppressors too need the past for justifying their social, economic, and political hegemony. And its malleability makes it vulnerable to forgery, as happened to the post-Yohannes history of Ethiopia.

The ascendancy of the Amhara to power in the region coincided with the intrusion of the international market system, metamorphosing the state to an absolutism that enabled the Tigrayan political élites to be systematically strangulated. Even the legendary war hero, Alula, was reduced to a mere governor in western Tigray, and the man who had prevailed over the mighty forces of Italy, the Mahdist Sudan, and Egypt, eventually lost his life in a minor skirmish against a local rival, *Ra'esi* Hagos Tafari, in February 1897.

It was not long before the ideological history was being written that Yohannes IV was turned into a villain. He was presented as a usurper who had not descended from the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, while the Amhara Minilik was exalted as a 'Solomonic' monarch who deserved the throne of his ancestors.[45] The latter was exonerated of all the deals he had made with Italy, Egypt, and Mahdist Sudan while they had been at war with the Ethiopia of Yohannes.[46] Serving its mission of legitimising the hegemony of the dominant group,[47] the ideological weapon of history made Minilik appear to be Ethiopia's saviour:

> Contrary to the times of Yohannes, all suffering disappeared during the reign of the magnanimous Minilik. Darkness receded, being replaced by dawn. The soldier and the peasant, the rich and the poor became equals, spoke to each other as equals. Everyone was happy, relaxed and slept the sleep of the world.[48]

[44] Nietzsche, op. cit. p. 19.
[45] Afework Gabre-Iyesus, *Dagmawi Atie Menilik* (Rome, 1909), p. 56.
[46] See, for example, ibid. p. 48. For a stark contrast, see *Blatta* Gebre Egziabeher Gila Miriam, in Tekeste Negash, *No Medicine for the Bite of a White Snake: notes on nationalism and resistance in Eritrea, 1890–1940* (Uppsala, 1986).
[47] Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds. and translators), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, written between 1929 and 1935 (London and New York, 1971), 1992 edn. pp. 10–22.
[48] Afework Gabre-Iyesus, op. cit. p. 4.

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No serious challenge to the Amhara hegemony existed until the departure of Italy, when the absolutist state was staggering to consolidate its power. In the process, this generated the lawlessness in eastern Tigray that in 1943 brewed the *Weyane*, a popular upheaval without any clearly-defined nationalist programme. Its brutal suppression by the British air force and a marauding Amhara army, however, left deep wounds among the people that nourished the 'We Remember' syndrome.

Tigray's rich past was manipulatable in the present. But Eritrea's, on the other hand, could not be disentangled from the trans-Mareb history that suffused the collective memory of Tigrayans in *Kebessa*. Harnessing and deforming it, to make it more serviceable, was an uphill battle.

ERITREA: THE PRESENT INVENTS THE PAST

The personality that the inhabitants of *Kebessa* wanted to construct was not compatible with the project of inventing a unique identity that was being promoted by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. The quest for an identity that they can feel is distinctly their own made the EPLF resolve their past. Deep down, they know they are a people who have shared a common history with Tigray, and nothing authentically 'Eritrean' is there. This burden of a history that they cannot claim their own alone generated a feeling of uneasiness and a sense of lowliness. Given the gap between the collective memory of the majority and the aspirations of the political élites, the invented history had to be fanciful: 'the more tenuous the possibility of linking the present to a great past, the more extravagant the myth'.[49]

The EPLF also misrepresented historiography, for instance, when they invoked Gundet, Gura, and Dogali as 'historical sites where Eritreans shed their precious blood to successfully maintain their independence',[50] and presented Alula as a national enemy of Eritrea. Almost all my political informants in 1994 regarded Yohannes and Alula as foreigners and conquerors, but some could not justify such misrepresentation. The Eritrean Minister of Information and Culture, Baraki Gabre-Selassie,[51] and two others, for instance, said defensively that they did not know anything about history. Unable to evade the

[49] David Gordon, *Self-Determination and History in the Third World* (Princeton, 1971), p. 111.
[50] *Ertra'n Qalsa'n* (EPLF, Sahel), January 1987, p. 26.
[51] Interview, Baraki Gabre-Selassie (52), Eritrean Minister of Information and Culture, Asmara, 29 June 1994.

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question, Seyum Tsehaye angrily replied: 'I cannot make a judgement on Emperor Yohannes… There were numerous Emperors in the past and I do not even know why you are so concerned about Yohannes'.[52] Girma Asmerom said: 'I have reservations with history. I do not know which is fact and which is fiction… History has no place in my mind'.[53] This is clearly a strategy of what has been ridiculed as 'if you can not murder it, forget it'.

The burden of the past that Eritrea shares with Tigray was turned into a *tabula rasa* where an ideological history was being written afresh. According to the EPLF, 'the peoples of present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia lived essentially apart from each other and in a state of mutual isolation' until the close of the nineteenth century. Hence the argument that 'these two neighboring peoples have had their own distinctly separate courses of historical development even before the coming of Italian colonialism'.[54] And although the people in *Kebessa* continue to exalt Alula as a military genius and a judicious governor, the EPLF in 1994 outrightly rejected his most obvious qualities:

> …I can not call Alula even a military hero. The wars we are told he fought were actually fought by Eritreans. Tell me where Alula fought? He is just the making of Ethiopian history writers.[55]
>
> …How can one forget the atrocities committed by Alula? When the Italians came in 1889, many regions of the *Kebessa* were totally abandoned – wiped out by Alula's wars against the Eritrean people.[56]

Again contrary to the historiography, the majority of Eritrean élites present Walde-Mika'el as a hero, and even as an 'Eritrean national liberation fighter'.[57] Bahta Hagos, too, was heroised for his differences with Yohannes IV. But Araya Demtsu and his son Debbab, influential figures in Akkale Guzai, who had no less formidable credentials, were disqualified from this status because they were natives of south of the Mareb. Despite the claim that alterations of historical records can be regarded as necessary evils, they can not be effective if they contradict the prevalent collective memory. The end of the nineteenth century –

[52] Interview, Seyum Tsehaye (42), Head of Eritrean Television, Asmara, 10 June 1994.
[53] Interview, Girma Asmerom (43), Head, Africa Department, Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Asmara, 28 June 1994, now Eritrea's Ambassador to Ethiopia.
[54] *Vanguard* (EPLF, Sahel), April 1977, p. 12.
[55] Interview, Adhanom Gabre-Mariam (45), ELPF Central Committee member and Governor of Seraye Province, Mendefera, 11 July 1994.
[56] Interview, *Abba* Yisaaq Gabre-Iyesus (63), Asmara, 12 July 1994.
[57] Interview, Nihedin Shengeb (32), EPLF Executive Committee member and Chairman of the Eritrean Youth Association, Asmara, 4 July 1994.

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the era of Alula and Walde-Mika'el – was too recent to deform extravagantly. Not distinct from the present, the past lives in the memory of the people, and is too sacred to be tampered with.[58]

Whereas those who opposed the union of Eritrea and Ethiopia in the 1940s were severely critical of the Amhara and Minilik II for having 'sold' them to the Italians, the EPLF argued in the 1980s that this was because the Amhara had not regarded Eritrea as theirs.[59] The act of negation was so bold that even the principled and consistent Walde-Ab, who used to identify himself with 'Our Mother, Ethiopia, and Our Father, the *Negus* [King]',[60] had by 1987 shifted to the musings of the EPLF:

> The evidence that shows Eritrea had been a different entity from Ethiopia is the intrigue made between Minilik and the Italians. A very dirty intrigue! Minilik did not see Eritrea as part of his country; and that was why he was sending messages to the Italians asking them to take it over. It was the wish of the government of Shewa that Italy seized Eritrea. Had Eritrea been their land, how could they involve themselves in an intrigue with the Italians to sell it for 500 guns and 2000 francs? The money and firearms were received by *Ra'esi* Mekonnen [the father of Emperor Haile Selassie]. You do not sell your land! You do not sell your country! If Eritrea was theirs, why did they sell it?[61]

In sum, the invented past contradicted *Kebessa*'s symbols and myths which were grist in the pre-modern era for 'nations before nationalism'.[62] People were put on the spot, made to choose between the tradition of their forefathers (the primordial history), and what their offspring came up with (the invented history). They trust their forefathers more than their offspring, since 'the grandparents come to serve as a symbol of continuity, offering an anchor for the sense of ethnic identity'.[63]

TIGRAY: THE PAST LEADS TO THE PRESENT

For the dispossessed, oppressed, and vanquished, the past becomes therapeutic. Nostalgia, which is 'memory with the pain removed', nourishes self-esteem,[64] and compensates for what is no longer enjoyed. It suffused the collective memory in Tigray and was easily domesticated by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Such recycled

[58] David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 21.
[59] *Ertra'n Qals'an*, January 1987, pp. 56–7.
[60] *Nay Ertra Semunawi Gazetta*, 14 March 1946, p. 4.
[61] Interview, Walde-Ab Walde-Mariam, EPLF, Orota, 31 August 1987.
[62] See, for example, Armstrong, op. cit. pp. 7–11.
[63] A. L. Epstein, *Ethos and Identity* (London, 1978), p. 148.
[64] Gordon, op. cit. p. 8.

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history was a marketable commodity that generated a lot of political potency.

Treated as history-less by the absolutist Amhara state, Tigrayans reacted by summoning the past, which resonated in their collective memory as an endangered resource the more it was strangulated by the state. Presented as a flawless era of milk and honey, the past looked as different from the prevailing unhappiness as a 'foreign country' that had to be recaptured.[65] It did not matter that the 'golden age' being revisited by the TPLF-travellers bore no resemblance to the Tigray of the present or the past. What mattered most was that today's imagined Tigray, unlike imagined Eritrea, did not contradict the remembered landscape. And herein lies the potency of history as political ammunition. It 'lives by false analogy; it entices the brave to rashness, and the enthusiastic to fanaticism by its tempting comparisons'.[66]

The fondly recollected past and the ensuing historical grievances offered the TPLF the ideal grist for their nationalist mill. The 21-metres long monolithic obelisk of Axum, erected in the early Christian era, was depicted on their insignia, reminiscent of the 'golden era'. That was why Tigrayans reacted bitterly to the aerial bombardment authorised by the *Derg* in 1988:

> The fascist WPE is trying to destroy everything, including the historic town of Axum… A clear manifestation of the desire to destroy our history and our people… Even when Fascist Italy invaded Ethiopia, it prevented its forces from attacking Axum. By bombing Axum from the air, the *Derg* has revealed how much of an enemy it is to the Tigrayan people… [Axum is] the centre of our history and the town that expresses our identity.[67]

The more recent past was easily traced. Dogali, for instance, where Alula defeated the Italians in 1887, was presented as a victory by Tigrayans on behalf of all Africans, demonstrating that blacks can defeat European colonialists.[68]

For the TPLF, the ascendancy to power by Yohannes, and his subsequent military victories against foreign forces, created 'a sense of patriotism and unity among the Tigrayan people'. The Amhara under Minilik, who were striking deals with Egypt, Mahdist Sudan, and Italy (all at war with Ethiopia), were presented as the 'relevant other' to promote a Tigrayan sense of identity. In fact, the genius of Alula was recognised so widely that the TPLF named one of its armed divisions

[65] Lowenthal, op. cit.

[66] Nietzsche, op. cit. p. 16.

[67] Transcript of a radio broadcast by 'Demtsi Weyane Tigray' ['Voice of the Tigrayan Revolution'], in *Miazia* (Makalle), 1, 1981, 8 April 1989.

[68] The 'Hezbawi Democracyawi Program', adopted during the Second Congress of the TPLF, May 1983, p. 6.

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after him. The loss of primacy to the Amhara was decried for ushering in 'the misfortunes of Tigray'.[69] The sense of undeserved subjection as the result of becoming just an Ethiopian province was responsible for Tigray's 'Perennial disaffection'[70] – similar to the Tatars' wailing against Russian overlordship, 'How did it happen that we became slaves of our former slaves?'[71]

Since periods of hardship tend to be stronger forgers of identity than triumphs,[72] the wounds from the *Weyane* were recalled by the TPLF. As argued by those who had assumed custodianship of the memory of brutal suppression, this had been meant to weaken Tigrayans. Entertaining an utopian vision, the TPLF was claiming in the late 1980s that the hegemony of the Amhara could actually be effectively challenged: 'Our heroic parents refused to accept oppression and exploitation. It is a history we are proud of.'[73] The stories, poems, and songs that had been collected from the *Weyane* of 1943 were revitalised and popularised in 1975. Thus, when the TPLF leaders named their insurgency the 'Second *Weyane*', this was a well-calculated step designed to garner the strong feelings the people have had about the 'First'. They named their bi-monthly organ *Weyin* and their combatants *Weyenti* , since *Weyane* is the terminology that has been introduced into the Tigrinya vocabulary to mean 'revolution'.

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The political leaders of both Eritrea and Tigray relied on history, nationalism's main source of emotional strength, which continued to be dug, 'reappearing like a Hindu holy man from his pit'.[74] But they read the same records differently. The heroes to the TPLF and the people of *Kebessa* were villains to the EPLF, because 'one man's myth is another man's poison'.[75] The invention of history would have stirred resentment among those who do not want to see their past rewritten. For them, a past that is not stable implies an uncertain present, as well as a future that lacks any direction. However, brute force and indiscriminate violence by the state neutralised the potential for civilian resentment.

[69] Manifesto of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), February 1976, pp. v–vi.
[70] John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 63.
[71] Cited in Alexander Benningsen, 'Soviet Minority Nationalism in Historical Perspective', in Robert Conquest (ed.), *The Last Empire* (Stanford, 1986), p. 131.
[72] Ernest Renan, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une nation? (Paris, 1882), p. 27: 'En fait de souvenirs nationaux, les deuils valent mieux que les triomphes; car ils imposent des devoirs; ils commandent l'effort en commun'. [73] *Weyin*, August 1989. [74] Isaacs, op.cit. p. 121.
[75] Gordon, op. cit. p. 128.

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