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Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6zk5981f>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 17(3)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

1989

DOI

10.5070/F7173016860

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The Horn of Africa: Myths, Misconceptions and Reality

By
Amare Tekle

I

The conflict that continues to torment the Horn of Africa has long ago assumed international dimensions. Not only are the major powers involved in the conflict, either directly or indirectly, but the human tragedy that continues to unfold in the region since 1974 has already etched an indelible mark on the collective pride of humanity.

Yet, it is remarkable that the external world still lacks a clear perception of the root causes of the conflict and, consequently, of the misery and pestilence in the Horn of Africa while, even more seriously, most governments continue to base their policies on myths and misconceptions which dangerously distort the historical record of, and the concrete reality obtaining in, the region. The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the myths, misconceptions, misperceptions and misrepresentations associated with the Horn of Africa.

II

The first myth involves the nature and prominence of the Ethiopian state in the Horn of Africa. For a long time now, Ethiopia has been perceived by outsiders, and presented by its ruling classes, as a resource-rich, culturally united and politically stable country. This has resulted in an exaggerated, if not totally unwarranted, presumption about its economic potential, political importance, military strength and strategic significance. The physical evidence was tantalizingly present. Ethiopia is the biggest, most populous and historically best-known country in the region. Consequently, it was assumed that the country which controlled Ethiopia would not only be able to control the Horn of Africa, but would also be able to play an influential role in the strategic Middle East-Red Sea-Gulf and Indian Ocean region as well as in the Nile Valley and Southern Africa.

This was, of course, a damnable chimera which has consistently been fatal to any policy which had its premises built on it. An empire state which was forged under the kingdom of Showa by conquests of hitherto independent principalities and kingdoms, Ethiopia has always been a divided country wracked by hostility, suspicion and hatred. It has been economically backward and its feudal system was oppressive and exploitative. It has also not been able to co-exist harmoniously with its neighbors.

The military council which overthrew Haile Selassie was acutely aware of this fact and knew fully well that Ethiopia could be saved only by the immediate resolution of the Eritrean conflict and the question of Ethiopian nationalities. Since the council was dominated by the Amhara,¹ however, it soon became evident that Mengistu Hailemariam's government ended up being, in this respect, as stubborn as its imperial predecessor and, in spite of its profession of Marxism-Leninism, was not ready to apply strictly the socialist principles of self-determination. As a result, there followed a proliferation of nationalist and liberation movements, and today, even more than in Haile Selassie's time, saving the Empire from disintegration has become the major preoccupation of the government.

If the liberation struggles in Eritrea and the Ogaden and the political struggles of the other nationalities precipitated the downfall of the imperial system in Ethiopia and were the root causes of instability and insecurity in the Horn of Africa, then these same problems remain the supreme threats to the present regime and to peace, security and stability in the region. Then too, Ethiopia's economic backwardness has been exacerbated by recent government policy which has exposed the population to recurrent famine and degradation.

If it is assumed that peace, stability and economic development in a given region are essential pre-requisites for successful exploitation of a sphere of influence by a dominating external power, then it would be difficult to accept, now as in the early days of the Ethiopian revolution, that the two superpowers could, if they were not ready to risk rushing into political quicksand, chart strategies and policies on the basis of Ethiopian paramountcy in the Horn of Africa. It should especially have been least attractive to the USSR which, already burdened by a fistful of hopelessly indigent client states from Cuba to Yemen and Vietnam, could hardly relish the prospect of adding yet another basketcase tottering on the brink of disaster. A wiser and potentially more advantageous alternative to both superpowers would have insulated the region from superpower competition and would have desisted from interfering with the political process which had been accelerated by the Ethiopian revolution. Only that could have, in the long run, guaranteed peace, security and stability in the region, obviated the present catastrophic condition of the region and saved the superpowers, particularly the Soviet Union, from being entangled in undesirable and ruinous alliances.

III

One misperception in the Horn of Africa concerns the nature of the government which assumed power after the Ethiopian revolution.

The Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) was, like its purportedly civilian successor, avowedly Marxist. The present government, like its predecessor, takes extreme care to insist upon the authenticity of Ethiopian Marxism. In fact, government propagandists go to extreme lengths to declare that the Ethiopian revolution has contributed to Marxist theory by harmonizing leftist militarism and the Marxist paradigm.

The government repeatedly proclaims its commitment to Proletarian Internationalism and its readiness to make sacrifices in the fulfillment of its internationalist duties. It devotedly follows the Soviet line on almost all international issues and sometimes even manges to embarrass itself by wrongly anticipating Soviet policy and action.² It has modelled its constitution on Marxist lines. Its domestic policies are Stalinist both in program and brutality.

Yet sizeable and influential segments of Western, and particularly American, officialdom and academia consider Mengistu Hailemariam and the majority of his government to be "nationalist" - presumably meaning that he and the majority of his government are only Marxists of convenience who, if handled properly, could be weaned away from the Soviet camp.

Such speculation is nurtured by the correct assumption that Marxism has no real roots either in the government or in Ethiopian society and also by the conventional wisdom that the government was pushed towards Marxism, and the welcome embrace of the Soviet Union, by none other than the West--the U.S. in particular--which had denied the new regime the necessary military wherewithal with which to control the chaos that engulfed the country and the centrifugal forces that had threatened the integrity of the ancient empire.

This is supplemented by the conviction that the marriage of convenience between the USSR and Ethiopia is fragile and could, if carefully, patiently and intelligently charged by the West, be made to dissolve since the U.S. and the West, and not the woefully inadequate Soviet Union and its allies, can provide the massive financial and economic assistance needed by Ethiopia not only to meet its developmental needs but also to offset the adverse effects of famine and drought. Egypt, Sudan and Somalia are constantly given as examples of similar broken political marriages with the Soviet Union.

Accordingly, the West, and particularly the U.S., are advised to refrain from unnecessarily antagonizing Ethiopia by taking any untoward political and economic action lest they further strengthen the Soviet Union's stranglehold over that country.³

On the basis of this idle speculation Western governments, lending institutions and international agencies have been generous with their assistance to the present Ethiopian regime.

Now, it is readily accepted that neither the PMAC nor its successor government is genuinely Marxist. A quick check of the background and actual conduct (as opposed to the pretensions) of the overwhelming majority of the membership of the Central Committee of the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE), not to mention the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC), proves that adequately. This, however, is irrelevant. It is more important to note that it collectively believes itself to be, and behaves as, Marxist. In effect, the present Ethiopian regime is a prisoner of its own creation, since the collectivity overwhelms the individual and not only makes him a reluctant believer but also forces him to be mindlessly dogmatic, conformist and bureaucratic.

Moreover, Soviet-Ethiopian relations are not even remotely similar to the relationships that existed between the Soviet Union and Egypt, the Sudan and Somalia. In both Egypt and the Sudan, no Marxist parties were in power, and indeed Marxists were systematically and brutally persecuted with hardly a word of protest by the Soviet government. Somalia established a revolutionary socialist party in 1976, much as Ethiopia did almost a decade later, but there was not enough time for the Soviet Union to create for itself a dominating role in the party bureaucracy. On the contrary, Ethio-Soviet relations are marked by active cooperation not only on the state-to-state level but also on the party-to-party level. In Ethiopia, the Soviet Union has had ample time to participate actively in the establishment of the party, in the recruitment of its members, in the training of its cadres and, indeed, in the selection of its leaders. The Soviet Union has a controlling influence in the WPE (some insist that some members are totally and exclusively loyal to it) in much the same way that it has influence in the military establishment. If any comparisons are necessary, then, the situation in Ethiopia is similar to that in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen). As it is, it seems certain that, in fact, it is the Soviet Union which learned from its past mistakes and thus took precautionary measures to avoid future embarrassment and loss.

Finally, the popular wisdom that the U.S. pushed Ethiopia to the Soviet camp by wavering in its commitments to the country is not supported by close scrutiny of the political developments in Ethiopia and the record of Ethio-U.S. relations between 1974-79. It is true that the U.S. had committed a few blunders--at least as viewed from the corridors of the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry--but a close analysis of the internal political dynamics in Ethiopia shortly after the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie would clearly indicate that since Marxist-controlled leftist movements had dominated the political process, Ethiopia would have been propelled towards the Soviet Union with or without U.S. support for the revolutionary government. The U.S. did not abandon Ethiopia; Ethiopia abandoned the U.S.

In this connection, it would be worthwhile to note that Western unity and solidarity was neither solid nor to be taken for granted. Most Western countries, from Scandinavia to the Italy and Germany, had looked after their own interests individually. Each, for its own reason, cooperated with and assisted Ethiopia. One must also remember that the E.E.C has been, and remains, a very great contributor of economic and technical assistance and famine relief. Even today, the Italian government which is, for whatever reason, helping with resettlement has been condemned by the U.S.

IV

The most common misconception fostered by all Ethiopian governments, both pre- and post-revolution, involves the nature of the struggle in Eritrea and the root causes of the Ogaden conflict. The official Ethiopian position is that the Eritrean conflict is inspired and sustained by pan-Arabism and Islamism which has always had historical ambitions to expand southward at the expense of Africa. The Ogaden conflict is presented as the product of Somali expansionism, itself an extension of the Arabo-Islamic drive to the South. Ethiopia is represented as the first victim of this nefarious Arabo-Islamic scheme.

This misrepresentation is conveniently based on the distortion of the policies of certain Arab states. Syria is castigated for considering Eritrea as part of the "Arab nation." A Libyan map which depicts Eritrea as part of the "Arab World" is denounced in Addis Ababa, although Mengistu Hailemariam was, at least on one occasion, made to suffer the indignity of awaiting the arrival of his host, Kadaffi, in a hall adorned by one such oversized map.⁴ The Taiz Conference (1977) of four Arab states which declared the Red Sea an "Arab Lake" is eagerly seized upon as an example of the wickedness of Arab intentions. All were used as justification for Ethiopia's fears, claims and actions.

The implications are clear. The Eritrean liberation struggle is portrayed as being neither indigenous nor genuine and as one which would instantly wither away without Arab assistance since it did not have any popular base or support. The Ogaden struggle, too, is regarded as not indigenous but an extension of Somalia's expansionist ambitions. Both serve a purpose: to pit Black against Arab in the politics of regional and international organizations and movements, particularly in the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

Reality refutes these misrepresentations. The Eritrean liberation war and the struggle in the Ogaden--as indeed all the other armed struggles being waged in Ethiopia--are rooted in the tortured history of the Horn of Africa. The Eritrean war is only the continuation of a liberation struggle waged first against Italian colonialism and then

British imperialism. The Ogaden struggle was started at the same time as--indeed some who view the area as the cradle of Somali culture and nationalism say before--the anti-colonial struggle in present-day independent Somalia. Whatever the case, it predates the existence of an independent Somalia.

All past and present major Eritrean liberation movements have declared themselves to be Eritrean. A brief glance at their basic documents and declarations makes that evident, and the claims and declarations of the other parties--including Arab or Ethiopian--cannot possibly be attributed, or indeed be acceptable, to them. True, a tiny splinter group had, for some time, flirted with Baathism; but such flirtation was short-lived because it was categorically and summarily rejected by the Eritrean people.

Is it possible to imagine that a liberation struggle can, in spite of the odds against it, persist - indeed flourish as it had done under the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) - for more than a quarter of a century if it does not have indigenous roots or is without extensive popular support? As for the liberation struggle in the Ogaden, only a reactionary fallacy can allow the conclusion that a goal etched in the sub-conscious of a people will vanish with the temporary eclipse of a movement.

A strategic region like the Horn of Africa will always attract the attention, excite the imagination and whet the appetite of foreign powers. Indeed, the record shows that powers far and near have, since the 16th century, involved themselves in the Horn of Africa, oftentimes at the express invitation of the countries of the region, particularly Ethiopia. There is no denying that historical fact. Such interventions, including the massive Soviet-Cuban intervention on behalf of Ethiopia during 1977-79, have admittedly influenced the course of history. It is evident, however, that these interventions cannot change or reverse it. As a final note, one must add that, at present, the only external forces--Arab or otherwise--that are fighting in the region are fighting on the side of Ethiopia.

V

Closely related to the misconception mentioned in the preceding section is the Western misconception concerning the ideological identity of Eritrean liberation movements. Western policy makers, as well as the media, persistently refer to the EPLF as "Marxist, Christian" while the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) is labelled as "conservative, pro-Arab, Moslem."⁵

This misconception, rooted either in ignorance or in deliberate distortion, has had grave implications for U.S., and some Western

policy on Eritrean independence. It is at once sad and amusing to note that, for whatever reason, the U.S. and the West prefer to ignore not only strong Eritrean disclaimers⁶ but also Soviet and Ethiopian insistence that even the EPLF consists of nothing more than a bunch of counter-revolutionary lackeys and paid agents of Western imperialism and Arab reaction.⁷

Accordingly, the U.S. has consistently allied itself with states and forces which were hostile to Eritrean independence, since an independent Eritrea was viewed as a threat to U.S. and Israeli interests in the region.

This misconception - or distortion - can be refuted at three distinct levels. An analysis of the basic documents and declarations of the two major Eritrean movements - the EPLF and ELF - reveals a striking similarity in ideological orientation as well as in rhetoric. For some time, both movements enjoyed wide support among all sections of Eritrean society while their respective leaderships, by and large, reflected Eritrean reality. They were both nationalist movements. It is therefore erroneous to identify them with different labels. True, they had basic differences, and for a long time fought each other as well as the common enemy, but their differences had nothing to do with the identity of Eritrea, their commitment to Eritrean independence, the composition of their respective memberships or foreign alliances.

Insofar as the socialist paradigm and revolutionary rhetoric were used to analyze events and issues, it must be accepted that it was used by all progressive--not necessarily Marxist only--groups and movements of the world.

Secondly, Eritrean attitudes were basically formed as a reaction to U.S.--and Israeli--policy and action, and did not stem from any deep-seated commitment to any particular ideology or animosity to either the U.S. or Israel. In fact, the EPLF at present condemns the Soviet Union and its allies even more strongly because they are now the only sources of military, diplomatic and political support of Ethiopia's war effort against Eritrea.⁸

It must be quickly added that both movements must--since they are Fronts--necessarily have their quotas of Marxists. It would be absurd to assume otherwise; nevertheless, these Fronts, like all other genuine Fronts, are broad-based movements which comprise several political tendencies and groups.

The U.S. was rightly held responsible by all Eritreans for its influence in the creation of an unworkable federal arrangement as well as for thwarting all Eritrean efforts to protest, at the U.N., Ethiopia's forcible annulment of even the federation. In addition, it was recognized by all objective persons in both Eritrea and Ethiopia--and that included non-Marxists as well as Marxists--that only the diplomatic and

military support of both the U.S. and Israel had enabled Ethiopia to continue its repressive domination of Eritrea. The two Fronts could not but embody that spirit.

Under the circumstances, it is not hard to imagine that the Eritrean liberation movements would reflect the mood of the people and would show hostility towards the U.S. and Israel or would seek help from all other available sources to sustain the struggle. On the other hand, it needs a fertile imagination to conclude from this that they were either Marxists or pro-Arab Moslems.

Thirdly, in March 1987, the EPLF, which at present controls all the liberated areas in Eritrea and solely directs the national war of liberation, issued a new constitution, a new National Democratic Revolution Program and a set of declarations reflecting its social, cultural, economic and foreign policies. The clarity of the provisions of these documents must remove all hitherto existing suspicions concerning the identity of the EPLF. The Front has made it unequivocally clear that it seeks to create a plural society with a mixed economy and that independent Eritrea's foreign policy would be genuinely non-aligned.⁹ Since the EPLF has established itself as a recognized force and possibly the only remaining obstacle to Soviet absolutism in the Horn of Africa, it will serve no useful purpose for Western, particularly U.S. and Israel, policymakers to continue to ignore it and its new positions. On the contrary, there is wisdom in testing the sincerity of its motives and objectives.

VI

Perhaps the strongest, and yet the most erroneous, myth considers the struggle for Eritrean independence as secessionist, similar to the Biafran and Katangan rebellions, and condemns it as a violation of the spirit, principles and decisions of the OAU.

It is based on the genuine and commendable aversion of African leaders and intellectuals to the further balkanization of Africa, on their sincere commitment to the achievement of a united Africa and on their more practical fear of the proliferation of ethno-nationalist movements. This view, however, largely stems from a lack of complete information on the historical and political developments in the Horn of Africa.

It is not at all certain that Eritrea (or the major part of it) has, as is claimed by Ethiopia and uncritically accepted by most of Africa, ever been part of Ethiopia. Indeed, it is not possible to delineate the boundaries of Ethiopia itself before the turn of the century. Yet further discussion of this issue would only serve to highlight an irrelevant point. Whatever the relationship between the two may have been at

some remote point in history, after the turn of the century they evolved as two distinct political entities, one as an empire the other as a colony. In fact, Ethiopia collaborated in the creation of Eritrea as a colony by being the other party in an international agreement. Consequently, the two have since then undergone different political experiences and developed their own personalities with distinct cultural, social and political values and institutions.

Secondly, if most Eritreans denounced the U.N. decision to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia as a travesty of justice and an act which arrested the complete decolonization of their country, then almost all Eritreans condemned the abolition of the federation and the forcible annexation of Eritrea to Ethiopia as totally illegal.

Ethiopia claims that the act to terminate the federation was solely an Eritrean decision since it was taken by the Eritrean Assembly (Parliament). However, Ethiopian eyewitnesses now corroborate Eritrean claims that the Eritrean Assembly voted under great duress to dissolve the federation.¹⁰ In fact, most knowledgeable Eritreans insist that the Assembly had adamantly refused to vote. In any case it was, according to Article 91 of the Eritrean Constitution, outside the jurisdiction of the Eritrean Assembly to vote for the dissolution of the federation.¹¹

Since the abolition of the federation and the incorporation of Eritrea into Ethiopia was illegal, Ethiopian claims that any interest in or discussions of the Eritrean question by other parties would be tantamount to interference in the internal affairs of Ethiopia must be rejected outright. It must be noted that it was made abundantly clear in the final report of the then U.N. Commissioner of Eritrea that the General Assembly of the U.N. would be seized of the matter if the federal relationship were changed.¹²

Under the circumstances, two points become glaringly evident. First, Eritrea cannot, in all fairness, be compared to or associated with either Biafra or Katanga, both of which had been effectively decolonized as component parts of other political entities which, like Eritrea, did have legal recognition as colonies. If Eritrea were to be compared then, it must be with Nigeria and the Congo (Zaire) and not with either Biafra or Katanga.

Secondly, the illegality of the abolition of the federation and the subsequent incorporation of Eritrea into Ethiopia inevitably returns Eritrea to its old colonial status and makes the Ethiopian presence in Eritrea a matter of colonial occupation. Naturally, such occupation would constitute a violation of the spirit and principles of the OAU charter. If parallels were to be made, the cases of Namibia and Western Sahara come rapidly to mind. Accordingly, the Eritrean people would have as much right to self-determination--no more, no less--as these two

countries and indeed the rest of ex-colonial Africa. It would also make their struggle, and the support given to it, as legitimate as the struggle of, and support given to, other colonial countries and peoples recognized by the OAU.

A closely associated myth asserts that Eritrean independence, or even the advocacy of Eritrean independence, will incite other nationalities in Ethiopia to make similar demands for independence. Again, all evidence stemming from the political developments in the Horn of Africa refutes this.

Ethiopia now hosts at least five other liberation movements. One, the Western Somalia Liberation Front (WSLF), is, like the EPLF, only a successor movement to others which existed before it. The struggle in the Ogaden is as old as the struggle in Eritrea. Also, it is absurd and unfair to the legitimacy of their respective causes to suggest that the other four were incited by, or followed the cue of, the Eritrean Liberation Movements. The liberation movements exist not because of Eritrea but because of Ethiopia and its governments, including the present one, which were not ready to allow its nationalities to live in harmonious equality. A careful study of the respective programs and declarations of the major liberation movements in Ethiopia, other than the WSLF, reveals that their wish is to create an egalitarian society based on democratic principles ensured by constitutional guarantees.

The cases and demands of Eritreans and the nationalities of Ethiopia are thus quite different. If, after the revolution, the Ethiopian regime had been ready to satisfy the above demands, the country would not today be consumed by seemingly interminable wars, but the rigid centralism of Mengistu Hailemariam's government could not accommodate the progressive programs, including requests for genuine regional autonomy, advocated by the leaders of the various Ethiopian nationalist movements. This is the cause of civil strife in Ethiopia, and it would have existed with or without the Eritrean liberation struggle.

VIII

It is the prevalent view of the Western cognoscenti and media pundits who follow developments in the Horn of Africa that a military solution is not feasible in the Eritrean conflict. The length of time that the war lasted as well as its constantly changing fortunes seem to force and warrant that conclusion.

There is no need to go into a detailed analysis of the merits of this conventional wisdom. Suffice it to say that this war cannot be viewed narrowly in terms of armies winning battles and achieving military victories. That may be impossible. Yet liberation was/is a political war fought for political victories, and it is dependent not so much on who "wins" as on who "loses". Such a war can be "lost" as a

result of new attitudes and perspectives which are forced on one or the other protagonists in a conflict when armies realize the futility of their efforts and their missions and when populations finally refuse to support the war effort of, and even rise in revolt against, their own recognized leaders. When the balance of resolve loses its equilibrium, then a liberation war is both won and lost.

All available information indicates the Ethio-Eritrean conflict has reached a qualitative stage which favors the EPLF. While the EPLF may not win a classical war, and it is not at all certain it will not, Ethiopia is surely "losing". In this sense, the EPLF would have "won" the war since, in the final analysis, the business of liberation movements is to win independence and not wars.

¹Paul Baxter, "The Problem of the Oromo or the Problems for the Oromo?," in H.M. Lewis (Ed), *Self Determination in the Horn of Africa*, London, Ethical Press, 1983, p.136.

²The worst example is perhaps Ethiopia's (Mengistu's) position on the internal struggle in the ruling Socialist Unity Party of Yemen in 1985 in which Ethiopia supported President Ali Nasser Mohammed's faction against the rebellious faction led by ex-President Abdul Fattah Ismail while the Soviet Union officially remained neutral and later reportedly "reprimanded" the Ethiopian leadership.

³U.S. Congress House Sub-committee on Human Rights and International Organization, International Economic Policy and Trade on Africa, Human Rights in Ethiopia, Hearings, 100th Congress, 1st session, October, 1988, Statement of Paul Henze, p.87.

⁴This incident occurred in early 1982. Mengistu rejected all advice to walk out in protest and to continue his journey from Moscow to Addis Ababa without meeting Kadaffi.

⁵"Ethiopia Attacks Arabs for Aiding Eritrean Secessionists," *Washington Post*, March 3, 1975.

⁶Tesfatsion Medhane, *Eritrea: Dynamics of a National Question*, Amsterdam, B.R. Gruner, 1986, p.90.

⁷Ibid., p.105.

⁸Ibid., p.90.

⁹EPLF, Political Report, March, 1987.

¹⁰In a forthcoming book tentatively entitled *Red Tears*, Dawit Woldegiorgis, ex-member of the Central Committee of the WPE and once a very senior member of the Ethiopian government, recounts how he, as a second lieutenant of the Imperial Army's Second Division stationed in Asmara, had led a detail which surrounded the Eritrean Assembly before and during the session which supposedly approved the dissolution of the federation.

¹¹Article 91 of the Eritrean Constitution stipulates: "The Eritrean Assembly cannot by any means of amendment introduce into the constitution any provision which will not be in conformity with the federal act."

12Final Report of the Commissioner for Eritrea, U.N. GAOR 7th Session, Plenary meetings, 1952-53 Annexes, p.23.