

Eritrea and Ethiopia
Did Ethiopia Colonize Eritrea?
PART SIX

This section of the book was added at the last minute. A retweet from Ambassador Beyene Russom provoked it, Eritrean ambassador to the Republic of Kenya. The tweet claimed that Ethiopia was a colonizer of Eritrea. I normally don't comment on tweeters, although I occasionally post articles. I would have said nothing had the sender been a non-official, but when an ambassador retweets something, it means it is the official version of the Eritrean government. I have attended several international conferences where Eritrean scholars brazenly refer to Ethiopia as a colonizer of Eritrea. For the first few years of independence, we assumed that the propaganda of the EPLF to justify the war and mobilize support would take some time before reality sinks in. But it did not. Thirty-two years after independence (May 1993), many Eritreans, and I can say most Eritrean youth, believe in this fabricated narrative that Ethiopia colonized Eritrea. It is a gross lie and does not do justice to history. For hundreds of years, Ethiopians and Eritreans have lived and fought together to preserve the integrity of the nation called Ethiopia or Abyssinia.

I made a polite but firm comment stating that it was not correct to categorize Eritrea as a colony of Ethiopia. The ambassador was polite in his response, nevertheless reaffirmed his position. Then there were angry outbursts from many Eritreans, some insulting me personally and some with abusive language asserting that Ethiopia was, in fact, a colonizer. Even though I acknowledge the struggle, the sacrifices, and finally the independence, I believe that Eritrea was not and cannot be a colony of Ethiopia according to the definition. However, the outpouring of anger continued. I understood then that there are serious historical issues that need to be clarified to the public and the generation that grew up exposed to the propaganda of war on both sides. That has to be sifted through, and truth must be told. I have sufficiently dealt with the issue of the Eritrean federation and the abrogation of the Federal Act in previous pages. Here, I want to add more on the claim of Ethiopian colonization.

Since both the federation and the abrogation were legal, as I explained in discussed earlier, Ethiopia cannot be categorized as a colonizer. The United Nations resolution that created the federation was binding. That was why it was implemented under its supervision. It did not create a "colony" called Eritrea. The 30-year war that followed the abrogation of the federation was a war caused by the abuses and excesses of successive Ethiopian governments, but Eritrea cannot be treated as a colony because it was a legally federated state and had always been part of Ethiopia before the Italian invasion when it was made a colony of Italy for 50 years (1890 to 1941). The Eritrean people exercised their option of self-determination and, through enormous sacrifice, on both sides, EPLF won the war and achieved independence, but it was not a colonial war like those fought in Angola, Kenya, Mozambique, and Namibia.

Let's look at what it means to be a colony of another country. Eritreans who are old enough know, and the younger ones must have been told what Italian colonialism did to them. That is colonialism in a classical sense. Let me remind the youngest generation about certain aspects of Italian colonialism and the British administration that followed.

In a conference in Asmara in Sept. 1982, which I attended the chairman of the Eritrean Veterans' Association, *Fitawrari* Asreshagene Ambaye, described how Habeshas¹ were treated in Eritrea during the period of Italian colonialism:

During the colonial time, Eritreans were recruited as soldiers in the fascist army. Though they spoke good Italian and were as good as the Italian soldiers they were never promoted beyond the lowest ranks (*buntaz* and *shumbash*²). But Libyan soldiers serving in Eritrea then were considered whites and given officers' ranks. ...Other soldiers were disciplined by fines (*mezzo baza*) deducted from their salaries but Habesha soldiers were disciplined by flogging 25 to 50 times. ... In all hotels and buses we Habeshas were not allowed to sit on seats designated for whites.... In some hotels we were served not with cups like white people but with empty tomato cans... " i

In the same conference *Ato* Mehari Misgina, a veteran author and journalist related the following experience he had, as a young boy during the period of colonization:

One day, when I was walking from Godayf (in Asmara) with other schoolmates, I saw a group of Italian soldiers cheering around two military trucks. When we got closer, we saw one Habesha young man being tied to two trucks, one leg and arm to the sides of each truck. Then, amongst cheers of the soldiers, the trucks drove in opposite directions, and what we saw was a horrible scene that has stuck in my mind to this day. The soldiers cheered as the man's body was torn apart. ii

Ato Mehari Misgina went into horrid detail to explain how brutal the Italians were to Habeshas. He told of his experience living in segregated Asmara where Blacks lived in separate areas with designated times and places to walk on the streets of Asmara. *Ato* Mehari Misgina was killed in the streets of Asmara after independence.

Because of what they experienced, young able-bodied men defected from the colonial military service and recruited followers from the Eritrean community to join the resistance struggle in Ethiopia. Two such commanders, *Balambaras*³ *Andom* Tesfatsion (later Brigadier General, post mortem) and *Ato* Gebrekal Debesay (later *Dejazmatch*), agreed to leave Eritrea and join the Ethiopian forces in Tigray. *Ato* Gebrekal had by then received training from the Italians in Libya and had just returned to Asmara. He refused to serve the fascists and took what options he had. With them were *Ato* Tesfaye Gebre Mariam (Brig.-Gen. post mortem) and *Ato* (later Maj.) Kidane Hailu. They speedily collected 126 followers and left for Tigray. There they met *Ras* Siyum who by that time had given up and was ready to surrender. *Balambaras* *Andom* and the rest told him that they could bring more reinforcements from Eritrea and continue the war. They appealed to him not to surrender, but he eventually did. *Balambaras* *Andom*, and *Ato* Gebrekal Debesay then decided to join the forces of *Ras* Imiru in Gonder, Armachiho region

¹ Term used by some to describe all Highland Ethiopians and Eritreans who were mostly Christian, by others to describe only those speakers of Tigrinya, and most recently in the diaspora, to describe anyone from Ethiopia and Eritrea. Historically, it is related to the word Abyssinia, an older name for Ethiopia.

² Two ranks of non-commissioned officers.

³ A military title, literally "commander of the fort."

and for five years fought the Italians until Ethiopia was liberated. *Balambaras* Andom was killed in battle and after liberation he was awarded the rank of brigadier general and buried with honor in Addis Abeba at Kidist Selassie. Gebrekal Debesay survived the war and was the governor of Setit and Gash under His Imperial Majesty's government. His last title was *Dejazmatch*. His son Maj-Gen. Mesfin Gebrekal is a distinguished officer who trained at Sandhurst UK Military Academy. He served in the Ethiopian Army and earned his PhD from the King's War College in London. (I was able to get the diary of *Dejazmatch* Gebrekal Debesay from his son Maj-Gen. Mesfin and have used the information to write a long chapter in my book, *Kihdet be Dem Meret*, on the role Eritreans played during the five-year resistance war in Ethiopia).

Another Eritrean resistance fighter was Col. Haileab. He was one of the distinguished first graduates from the Holetta Officer's Training School just as the Italian invasion of Ethiopia was taking place. After graduation, he led the Black Lion resistance special force that fought the Italians tooth and nail until he met his death at the hands of the Italian fascists.

No, Ethiopia was not a colonizer. During the colonization period, Eritreans were treated horribly by the Italians and the door to opportunity was closed. When Eritrea was federated and then united with Ethiopia, all opportunities were available to Eritreans more than to other Ethiopians. The figures prove that.

The colonial period was even worse for the Muslims. In Eritrea, under the Italians, Muslims were marginalized. Once at a rally in Asmara, a man from Saho was speaking about the treatment of Muslims during those times. Muslims were being marginalized in the only country they knew to the extent there was a saying:

A Muslim without a country
Is like the sky without a pillar

It was only after the federation that Muslims got their rightful place in society.

Let me mention a few other examples of what it means to be a colony.

First education: The department of education of the colonial administration officially published a notice that Eritreans could have only four years of education. They were prohibited from further study. There was not a single secondary school in Eritrea during the Italian colonial era. Eritreans' struggle for their rights began after that era. Even the British who took on the administration of Eritrea after the Second World War did not do much better than the Italians. The first secondary school built by the British administration just a year before they left Eritrea had only 167 students. Overall, there were only 1,667 students in all of Eritrea at the time the British left.ⁱⁱⁱ

What about schooling under the federation with Ethiopia? It was at this time that the second secondary school was established, Haile Selassie I Secondary School, with a capacity for 1,000 students. Some of the current leadership of the EPLF in Eritrea are the products of this school. The various leaders of Eritrea received secondary and higher education only during and after the federation, in Asmara, or in most cases in Addis Abeba. A few years after the federation, the number of teachers in Eritrea was 2,278 and the number of schools had reached 472. The number of secondary school students had reached 120,000.

Far from "colonizing" Eritrea, in the realm of education Ethiopia supported it at all levels. On researching this issue, Professor Tilahun Yilma, found that "the Ethiopian government financed

99% of all the educated Eritreans, elementary, secondary and college. In the last 25 years, 2500 Ethiopian doctors have graduated and of these 416 are Eritreans.”^{iv} During my governorship in Eritrea I reopened Asmara University, which was closed for a few years as result of the war. Engineer Tekeste Ahderom was the vice-chancellor. In 1981 I issued the degrees to the graduates of the university as can be seen in the picture.

During my three years as governor, we spent over 8 million birr for the reconstruction of destroyed schools. In 1974 EC when the war was raging the Ministry of Education allocated over 1,396,000 birr for the construction of new schools. In the literacy campaign beginning in 1971 EC, 47000 students had participated in the program. Though 250 of the 472 schools were destroyed during the war the number of students increased not decreased despite that. In 1966 EC there were 124,752 students in the 472 schools at the end of 1973 EC there were 140,968 students in the 220 schools. The number of teachers had increased to 2,525. Asmara University flourished through the years. In 1971 EC the university had 314 students and in 1977 EC it had 2,677. In 1975 EC the budget of the university was 4, 311,990 whereas in 1971 EC its budget was only 220,000. ^v

It must also be understood that in the realm of business, Eritrea was certainly not a colony of Ethiopia. The economy of Eritrea was hardly disrupted after the federation. People from other parts of Ethiopia did not invade Eritrea to take over the economy. The business sector continued to be largely owned by the Italians. The Italians owned all the major industries, and I can list a few:

- Melotti Beer owned by Madame Melotti
- Asmara Textile owned by Mr. Barartoli
- Eritrea Shoe Factory owned by Chiplili
- Matches and Candles Industry Mr. Pupuni
- Narabi Shoe Manufacturing (Dahalak) Mr. Fifili Bini
- A-1 Poligraphic Printing Mr. Astodela
- National Oil I Manufacturing Mr. Borboliso
- Sidao Asmara Electric owned by Mr. Masimo Fontana
- Supral Meat Industry Dr. Jo Pasars
- Fenili: Vitalini Alcohol and Soft Drinks Mr. Jussepi Fenili
- Massawa Salt Industry Jovani Predichini
- Eritrean Cement Industry *Kegnazmatch* Sunabir

Overall there were over 20 industries that were still owned by Italians while I was there. If we move to the agricultural sector :

- Cotton plantation at Tessenei and Aligider was still owned by Baratol
- The farm at Adi Teklezan was still owned Mr. Danday
- The Vegetable Farm at Ginday was owned by Mr. Danday

Italians or Eritrean entrepreneurs owned the entire economy of the country. I don't remember a single factory or any big business owned by Ethiopians from other parts of the

country. Except for bureaucrats and soldiers Eritrea was mostly owned and run by Eritreans and Italians. How is this colonization?

On the other hand hundreds and thousands of Eritreans flooded Addis Abeba, Diredawa, Welega, Wello, Gonder, Tigray, Kaffa and owned significant parts of businesses. The Eritrean elites competed to get the attention of the aristocracy and were able to assume senior positions and intermarry with the royal family. Spencer writes

While large numbers of Shoans [Ethiopians from the central province Shoa] came to occupy the federal offices in Asmara and Massawa, the influx of Eritreans into Addis Ababa was on a much larger scale. Denied employment under the Italian and British regimes, they came to Ethiopia in such numbers as gradually to dominate the Ethiopian Air Force and the police, 40% of the Army officer corps, much of the telecommunications, and nearly 100% of the taxi drivers in Addis Abeba. The Eritreans soon proved themselves to be the Irish of Ethiopia.^{vi}

I would clarify that statement by adding that they were like the Irish in the sense that they came in large numbers to work in Ethiopia as the Irish workers did in England, but unlike the Irish in Great Britain, Eritreans were welcomed in Ethiopia and their incredible work ethic made them successful in almost all sectors across Ethiopia. This is the truth. (For more, read my book)

ⁱ . *Symposium on the Future of Ethiopia*. This was held while I was governor of Eritrea and is a compilation of all the speeches given at the symposium.

ⁱⁱ . Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ . The statistics in this paragraph and the following one were taken from the archives of the Ministry of Education. I have used these figures many times in speeches when I was in Eritrea.

^{iv} . From an article in *Tobia Magazine*, No. 12. Professor Tilahun is one of the foremost scholars of Ethiopian studies.

^v . Figures were taken from government documents.

^{vi} . Spencer, *Ethiopia at Bay*, 303.