

**Eritrean History in Perspective: Apartheid, divide & rule, to kill the fish empty the sea**  
**Dawit Gebremichael Habte**  
**May 1, 2011**

I will start this essay with some words of our late Professor Tekie Fessehazion:

*“For people of my generation Eritrea’s independence is a dream come true. But as Ato Woldeab wrote in one of his essays in 1946, political independence is not sufficient. We should not rest until everyone, regardless of his or her station in life is empowered to play a meaningful role in Eritrea’s future. How that can come about is the greatest challenge facing post conflict Eritrea. But to play that role, one has to first understand Eritrean history. No amount of sophistication on democratic theory would do unless one has a basic understanding of how Eritrea came to be.”*

The genesis of modern Eritrea reads like the script of all modern African countries: European missionaries survey a land, purchase property, and pass it to their governments, and overnight a group of people are declared subjects and obligated to submit. In the same vein in Eritrea, it begins with an Italian Catholic priest with colonial ambition (Giuseppe Sapeto) landing and acquiring a piece of land on the southern shores of the Red Sea in 1869 and passing it along to the Italian government. The plan, like the proverbial Arabian camel, was to slowly displace the dispensable African native and in his land to build a colonial settlement. In 1890, Eritrea was formally declared an Italian colony. Multiple treaties were signed with the British (who were in the Sudan), the French (who were in Djibouti) and an Abyssinian King defining modern Eritrean borders as we know them today. Italian colonial adventure in Eritrea lasted until the middle of World War II. In 1941, the Italians were defeated out of Eritrea by the allied powers led by the British. At the end of World War II, the newly formed United Nations was used as a tool to deny Eritreans their right to self-determination. In 1950, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) passed a United States sponsored resolution federating Eritrea with Ethiopia, a country which at the time was a key ally of the west, particularly the United States. The federation was short-lived. Within a decade, in 1962, the Ethiopian rulers decided to unilaterally dissolve the federation, and annexed Eritrea as one of their fourteenth province. There was no voice that condemned this move and Eritrea’s case was closed, at least so thought the architects of the injustice against the people of Eritrea. Here we have an outline of the script of nine decades of wrong doing against Eritrea.

The human aspect of history, however, is usually lost or overshadowed by the details of political history. As we saw above, the genesis of modern Eritrea was like the rest of Africa. What makes the Eritrean case unique is the fact that Eritreans had to endure a brutal oppression and colonization by a fellow African neighbor which was serving as an agent of those that tried to dehumanize Africans. Eritrea was also the only country out of 53 former European colonies in Africa, large and small, that was denied its independence.

Each colonizer has applied its own unique system of oppression to subdue and dehumanize Eritreans: Italian apartheid used segregation; British rule was marked with divide and rule; while Ethiopian rulers were determined to “dry the sea in order to kill the fish”. Irrespective of the color and economic status of the colonizers, all of them had tried to subdue Eritreans and kill the aspiration of the people of Eritrea to be independent.

As the African-American author Theodore Cross wrote in his book The Black Power Imperative, “*the denial of education-- or the use of education or instruction for repressive indoctrination or manipulation-- is a significant means of restricting liberty and curbing access to power.*” The Italians used both segregation and limited access to formal education as a means of sustaining their system of apartheid. During the Italian colonization, 4th grade was the highest level of Italian language based formal education bestowed upon a native Eritrean. The downtown areas of the capital city Asmera and port city of Massawa were also designated as “Whites only”. Additionally, a number of “Whites only” military camps were scattered across the nation. The two groups of non-white native Eritreans that had access to these “Whites only” parts of the nation were maids and interpreters. While many of the Italian men saw no contradiction in

sleeping with African women and having mixed race children, none of them saw it fit to legalize their unions with Africans. What a hypocrisy!

British rule did not last as long. But, the damage the British had inflicted on the people of Eritrea is not any less significant than that of their predecessors or successors. As victors of the war, the British took it upon themselves to rob Eritrea of everything they considered valuable: from floating dry docks to whole factories and from oil drilling machinery to railway wagons. All of it was shamelessly sold in the open. In few years, they deprived Eritrea of what in today's money amount to nearly half a billion. The aim of it all: to prove that Eritrea was not economically viable and thus either the British themselves or one of their allies should rule the land, or at least part of it. At the same time, had the British not provided them with the necessary political and institutional cover, it was less likely for the Ethiopian feudal lords to consider grabbing more land than they had administered during the preceding centuries. They would have been happy to live within the country south of the Mereb River. But, that was not meant to be. Instead, the British came up with their time proven divide and rule strategy. To give their devilish scheme an international face, they tried to sell the idea of partitioning Eritrea in their "Bevin-Sforza Plan". The "Bevin-Sforza Plan" was drafted by Ernest Bevin and Count Carlo Sforza (the British foreign secretary and Italian foreign minister at the time) to decide the fate of the Libyans, Eritreans, and Somalis that were under Italian colonization. The British agenda for Eritrea from day-one was to sow discord among Eritreans and eventually split the country into two parts: the Highland Christians to join Ethiopia and the Lowland Muslims to join their colony in the Sudan. The reaction of Muslim and Christian Eritreans to this evil British plan was swift: "we survive or perish as one people." The plan was also rejected at the United Nations General Assembly in May 1949. The British and Americans then went to their "Plan B", obstructing and frustrating Eritrea's aspiration for independence by placing it under feudal and backward Ethiopia in a federal arrangement.

Full political and institutional support of the British coupled with an American John Hathaway Spencer directing Ethiopian foreign policy, the Ethiopian feudal lords nullified the United Nations guaranteed federal agreement and declared Eritrea as the fourteenth province of Ethiopia. Eritreans, who by then had given up on getting justice through peaceful means, were forced to start their armed struggle for independence. The armed struggle which started in September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1961 lasted 30 long years. If anyone wants to have a glimpse at how costly this war was and how brutal the Ethiopians were, all one has to do is take a look at the Ethiopian massacres of Ona, Basik Dira, Agordat, Hazemo, Hirgigo, Um Hajer, Wokiduba, Asmara, Shieeb etc. No Eritrean nationality was spared from the Ethiopian death squads. Basically, when it came to being killed en masse by the Ethiopian army, it was an equal opportunity affair. All ages, religious and ethnic groups were targeted. In the village of Ona, for example, the inhabitants of the town were rounded up at the village mosque and more than 600 innocent civilians were slaughtered by the Ethiopian army with machine guns. The Ethiopian army committed this cold-blooded butchery at Ona in order to avenge the death of one of their generals who was ambushed in November 1970 by the Eritrean Liberation Army. In Shieeb, over 400 women and children were run over by tanks to avenge the defeat the Ethiopian army sustained at Afabet. That was the nature of the Ethiopian colonization. The motto from the onset was clear: "dry the sea to kill the fish".

The days of colonization both African and European had to come to an end for the people of Eritrea in May 24, 1991, after a long and bitter political and armed struggle. Then, once you get an independent yet economically devastated country, what do you do with it? Did the leadership and people of Eritrea live up to their own aspirations? Did they live up to the wishes and hopes of their supporters such as the renowned Tanzanian activist and journalist Abdul Rahman Mohamed Babu who in 1985 proclaimed that "*Eritrea's Present is the Remote Future of Others... I am not ashamed to admit that I have been overwhelmed by what I saw. Living, working and eating with these staunch revolutionaries I am tempted to echo the famous quote: 'I have seen the future of Africa and it works'?*" If the accomplishments of the past 20 years are any indication of the future of Eritrea, the answer is a resounding Yes! The people of Eritrea have defied the time-tested social transformation and sustainable development strategy of nation building by developing and transforming their society within mere 20 years. In the past two decades, Eritreans have developed the vital

foundation of a nation: a group of people with a common memory and shared vision, the ultimate goal of any society.

Let me leave you with yet another quote from the late Professor Tekie Fessehatzion:

*“The world and especially the US might as well accept the reality of Eritrea. It has to be said for the umpteenth time that Eritrea is not just a place; it's one big heart that embodies the indestructible spirit of a brave people. Surely Eritreans are accustomed to being betrayed but, as is often the case, they always come through, stronger and more determined than ever to make sure that Eritrea lives. For an Eritrean the country is more than a piece of land: it's a sacred trust that must be passed from one generation to the next, whole and indivisible.”*

Congratulation Eritrea for 20 years of truly independent existence!