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Modern Ethiopia and Colonial Eritrea*

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In September 1946, during the crucial period of the British Military Administration of Eritrea, an article appeared in *The Economist* in London under the title: "Eritrea has right to exist?"¹ The basic issue was: is Eritrea a viable country and how will this affect her relations with Ethiopia? Scepticism about the future of Eritrea led the British political design to divide the country between Sudan and Ethiopia. *The Economist* reminded its readers that Eritrea had been created artificially by the Italians, and it would therefore be very easy to divide a country without any political unity – in this case Eritrea, an artificial entity requiring artificial economic support.

More recently, I was asked a remarkable question by a student in Bologna that came to mind while I was preparing this paper. The question was: "Is Eritrea a nation or a state?" This involves two questions – Has Eritrea the right to exist? Is Eritrea a nation or a state? – that reflect the 20th century history of this African area whose destiny has been uncertain for many decades. They also relate to the discussion about the nature of modern Ethiopia and its political changes over the last century.

It is difficult to answer both questions without taking into consideration the dynamics of European powers, autonomous events in Africa and the interrelation with colonialism. I would like to stress one important point: Eritrean history can be analysed only in a wider context, the context of modern African history and the context of the relations between Europe and Africa. It is therefore necessary to focus on political developments in Africa during the 19th–20th century and the confrontation between Europe and Africa in order to understand the dynamics of historical events and compare the colonial order to previous political entities. History should take care to study this confrontation. Modern African history and colonial African his-

* This article is a revised version of a paper that I presented in July 2001 at the International Conference on Eritrean Studies in Asmara and also refers to the paper I presented at the XIV International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa in November 2000. I have preferred to publish both pieces together, given the similarity of my underlying reflexion and given the fact that I do not consider Ethiopia and Eritrea as two separate fields of research, as I mention here.

¹ See the debate related to this article in I. TADDIA, *L'Eritrea colonia 1890–1952. Paesaggi, strutture, uomini del colonialismo*, Milano F. Angeli 1996, 361.

tory are two topics interrelated in the historiographical debate concerning the last decades in African history.

The rise in Africa of a new concept of state – a territorial and bureaucratic state – is a product of recent events. In this perspective it is of interest to focus on the relations between the two identities – modern Ethiopia and colonial Eritrea.² The 19th century created colonial order, but not only Europe is responsible for this; modern Ethiopia took part in this process as well. This is the first point I would like to emphasize here. If we look at historical events, there is no dichotomy between Ethiopian and Eritrean history throughout the 19th century. They must be considered in a single context.

Modern Ethiopia is a product – a combination – of African history and European history. Colonialism affected Ethiopia as well as Eritrea. Moreover, modern Ethiopia was constructed with the help of colonialism. Regarding the construction of Ethiopia and the construction of Eritrea we can identify a common theme of analysis: Eritrea, as a state, is a modern entity and basically the product of a colonial reality. Ethiopia emerged from the clash with colonialism as a modern state and in some respects can also be seen as a colonial construction. The Ethiopian state is the result of a political struggle against colonialism, but at the same time is profoundly affected by colonialism itself, an apparent contradiction of history. Eritrea is a part of the same historical process, a fact that I would like to discuss here.³

² I do not see any dichotomy between these two concepts, but I will explain more precisely later on in what sense I refer to these historical identities. For a background on Ethiopian/Eritrean literature on nationality and state see D. CRUMMEY, “Society, State and Nationality in the Recent Historiography of Ethiopia”, *Journal of African History*, 31, 1990, 113–119. For the developments in Eritrean historiography see: BAIRU TAFLA, “Interdependence through Independence: the Challenges of Eritrean Historiography”, in H. MARCUS (ed.), *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies, 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Lawrenceville, Red Sea Press 1994, 497–514. For different approaches to colonialism and its role in Eritrean/Ethiopian society see: T. NEGASH, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea (1882–1941)*, Uppsala University 1987; Y. MESGHENNA, *Italian Colonialism: a Case Study from Eritrea*, Lund 1988; J. GEBREMEDHIN, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*, Trenton, Red Sea Press 1989; Y. OGBAZGHI, *Eritrea: a Pawn in World Politics*, Gainesville, University of Florida Press 1991; F. GUAZZINI, *Le ragioni di un confine coloniale Eritrea 1898–1908*, Torino, L’Harmattan Italia 1999; ALEMSEGED ABBAY, “Not with them, not without them: the Staggering of Eritrea to Nationhood”, in *Africa*, LVI, 4, 2001, 459–491; A. GASCON, *La Grande Ethiopie, une utopie africaine*, Paris, CNRS 1995.

³ The great bulk of historians of Ethiopia do not seem to take this perspective in analysing modern history; they tend to focus on the significance of the clash with Europe and not how Europe affected the construction of the state; see, for example, S. RUBENSON, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence*, London/Addis Ababa, Heineman-Addis Ababa University Press, 1976.

The late 19th century was a decisive period for the creation of the modern state of Ethiopia. During the reign of Menilek, the Solomonic monarchy consolidated its expansion to the north and south. This expansion, however, was accompanied by the loss of the area north of the Mareb, which became the colony of Eritrea. The official creation of the Eritrean colony in 1890 was the result of negotiation and compromises between Italy and the Ethiopian Empire that had taken place over a long period of time. The existence of the colony was not questioned after the battle of Adwa in 1896, when Italy was defeated. Ethiopia started to negotiate its borders and build itself up as a modern state during the confrontation with Europe. This is the beginning of the constructed modern state whose history can be analysed at the same time as Eritrean colonial history. Ethiopia defended its independence through negotiations and confrontations. The construction of the state and the preservation of political integrity are the main themes of modernity.⁴

Modern Ethiopia is therefore a product of the encounter with European power and colonialism. Modern Ethiopia is a state whose relations must be understood in the light of colonial developments. Its borders were established during the scramble for Africa and were negotiated with European countries. Eritrea is a colonial entity, a modern state (or an artificial state, if you prefer, like many other African former colonies), whose boundary is the product of colonial history and has many characteristics in common with other African societies. European colonies were alien entities; nonetheless, African states are the legacy of European colonies and keep colonial borders alive. In this respect, if we look at African political events in the second half of the 20th century, Eritrea is a unique case in Africa: a colony that has not become a state. An exception to this rule may be Western Sahara whose political events are still under controversy.

The history of contemporary Africa underlines the dilemma of the ex-colonial states in creating a national unity within colonial borders. The nation (or the pseudo-nation) can be considered and analysed as a product of colonial power and therefore lacks stability. The history of Eritrea must be studied within the colonial context. Colonialism created a national identity that was put in question by later events. If the 19th century is the scene of African/European confrontations, decolonization politics can be analysed from a double point of view: from a European perspective and from an African perspective. Modern Ethiopia and colonial Eritrea must again be studied as two integral parts of the same dynamic.

⁴ An interesting picture of modern Ethiopia and its relation with Europe is provided by D. CRUMMEY, "Ethiopia, Europe and Modernity: a Preliminary Sketch", *Aethiopia*, 3, 2000, 1–21.

The case of the Horn of Africa is in fact different from the general pattern of African decolonization. In the Horn decolonization took on a political dimension. Political and international order can explain the case of the Horn. It is a matter of international diplomacy and politics reflecting the role of Italy as a weak power that lost the international competition for colonies during the Second World War. The unsuccessful – or unfinished – decolonization is related more to the history of the colonial power – Italy – than to the history of the Horn itself. In the Horn the African colonies were not the main players in the political game that took place in Europe. Eritrea is a consequence of a situation created by the colonial power – a colony that never became a state.⁵

Eritrea is a political construction of colonialism and did not emerge as an independent state during the decolonization process due to a complex of interrelated causes. International politics played an important role in the non-decolonization process, but we should also pay attention to the role of Italy during the Second World War. As a colonial power, Italy failed to promote decolonization in its former colony. Eritrea as a consequence did not emerge as an independent state. We can speak of the political dimension of the non-decolonization – of the failure in decolonization.

Eritrean independence in 1991 and the referendum in 1993 are events taking place within a very specific context in post-colonial Africa today. It is not simply a case of delayed decolonization, postponed by 30 years compared to other former African colonies. Eritrea is a colony that did not become a state and its independence in 1993 took shape under the same borders settled during colonialism. It is a state in Africa born at the end of a long struggle whose dimensions were both regional and international. But colonialism seems a very distant phenomenon. No colonial ideology, no colonial economy seems to justify the need for independence. Other issues are relevant in explaining the present state. The reorganization of the Eritrean state today is based on an historical, political and economic reality that seems very different from the one left by Italian colonialism (1890–1941) and the British Military Administration (1941–1952). Moreover, Ethiopian politics during the *Derg* radically changed the previous economic and political order and completely changed the colonial entity. In addition, the development of the military struggle in the 1970s and the 1980s was caused by internal political alliances and international relations. On account of these factors, I prefer not to analyse the present political context in terms of a colonial legacy. Eritrea is a case of non-decolonization until the 1950s, or perhaps the 1960s. I tend to think of Eritrea today as being removed both from its colonial legacy and the balance of power created during colonialism.

⁵ See the points I made in I. TADDIA, “At the Origin of the State/Nation Dilemma: Ethiopia, Eritrea, Ogaden in 1941”, *Northeast African Studies*, 12, 2–3, 1990, 157–170.

Eritrea was created artificially by colonialism: colonialism itself provided the source for the existence of the nation, as in the case of other African countries.⁶ The post-colonial situation and the struggle for independence changed this historical legitimacy. A new confrontation, that with the Ethiopian hegemony, resulted in a precise military leadership in a radically changed international context. As a new state, Eritrea is a product of recent international politics and of a new dynamics in the Horn.

The construction of a nation today raises certain problems of national identity and develops an ideology based on the legitimization of the historical past. Eritrea is a new state, but this phenomenon does not allow us to reconsider its history through a process of historical justification. As a modern political entity, Eritrea emerged only in the last century – under the form of the colonial state. The formation of the state poses certain problems to historians. In Eritrea we are facing the same problems related to the construction of a historical identity, and therefore a new historiography regarding the precolonial past is clearly emerging in the country. Eritrea must construct its own historiography, after constructing the state.

There is an attempt today in independent Eritrea to justify the present through past history: reconstructing the past in terms of the present, means the precolonial past in terms of the new Eritrea.⁷ Eritreans try to construct the nation by legitimizing it through ancient and modern history. The present political context influences our knowledge of the past and our understanding of history. These are the beginnings of a new historiography. The vision of precolonial history is rather speculative; there is a need for a critical reassessment of precolonial history that should be placed in a precise context.

⁶ I prefer to understand Eritrean history in this sense, although the issue of the relation of Mareb Mellash to the southern area before the 19th century is very complex. For themes related to a construction of an identity, see: ALEMSEGED ABBAY, *Identity Jilted or Reimagining Identity? The Divergent Paths of the Eritrean and Tigrayan National Struggles*, Asmara and Lawrenceville, Red Sea Press 1998; J. SORENSON, “Discourse on Eritrean Nationalism and Identity”, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 29, 2, 1991, 300–319; J. SORENSON, *Imagining Ethiopia. Struggle for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press 1993; B.K. HOLCOMB – I. SISAI, *The Invention of Ethiopia. The Making of a Colonial Dependent State in Northeast Africa*, Trenton, Red Sea Press 1990.

⁷ This attempt was clearly evident in Asmara at the first International Conference on Eritrean Studies in July 2001. See for example the main papers on archeology that offer clear proof of this tendency among scholars. The proceedings of the conference are in press. For a discussion related to the process of nation-building, see: K. TRONVOLL, “The Process of Nation Building in post War-Eritrea: Created from below or directed from above?”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 36, 3, 1998.

The reconstruction of the past in terms of the present is a political phenomenon. It was the same during the classical African post-colonial period, when a national historiography was created in each independent country with the precise aim of constructing African history on a national basis. African historiography reproduces a national past that is a reconstruction *a posteriori*. The creation of historiography has close links with the issue of national identity. After the creation of the state, the historiography seems an important step in building a nation.

Writing history is in reality more complex: a regional area – the Horn of Africa as a whole – needs to be taken as a point of departure for writing its history. Eritrean history must be analysed in the context of a wider historical and geographical area. We should not look for Eritrea before Eritrea. Eritrean history must be placed in a geographical and chronological context. We need to study an entire area as a subject for research. A history of Eritrea does not exist, nor does a history of Ethiopia as two separate fields of research.

This does not mean that Eritrea has no right to exist as a political autonomous entity. I would like to be clear about this point. Eritrea has the right to a national historiography like any other African country, but a national historiography has to be built on a solid basis. Methodological research must be carried out and local sources, long underdeveloped, need to be exploited. African historiography is still based on European sources. In many respects Eritrea and Ethiopia are no exceptions. Oral and written local sources deserve more attention.

Eritrea, an African contradiction

Let us speak a little more about this unique case in Africa: Eritrea. First of all, I would like to reaffirm here one important theme that I mentioned in the first part of this paper: the birth of the new state – Eritrea – has nothing to do with the colonial order and the legacy of colonialism. Eritrea is not a case of a state that missed out on decolonization and whose independence was put off until thirty years later. The birth of the new state is the consequence of phenomena of regional and international hegemony that are difficult to explain, and is also the result of the new dynamics of the relations between Africa and the western world. The origins of the state, therefore, need a solid ideological basis that the present ruling class is working on amid many contradictions. The country needs to justify its present situation on a rational level and, as a consequence, a national historiography is emerging that tries to legitimize the state. In this sense Eritrea is running the same course as a post-colonial African state: a national historiography needs to be built in order to underline the country's unity.

During the last two International Conferences, in Addis Ababa in November 2000 and in Asmara in July 2001, I had the opportunity to develop

my thoughts a little regarding Eritrea and Ethiopia and to rediscuss many issues related to the history of these two countries in modern times, including colonialism. In Addis Ababa I did so with an emphasis on recent Italian historiography,⁸ while in Asmara I made some reflexions on modern Ethiopia and colonial Eritrea that I would like to rediscuss here in a new context.

If we look at Eritrean history, I think we can identify a double contradiction. In the midst of a profound crisis of African states, in a context of disintegration of the institution and a rediscussion of the concept itself, the birth of a new state in 1993, which exactly recreates the former colonial borders, is a phenomenon that deserves attention. This is, in fact, the main contradiction: the recreation of an entity that in the end makes reference to a territorial demarcation created during the colonial partition. The case of Eritrea therefore provokes certain reflexions on the nature of the post-colonial state. At a time when the very concept of the state is living a moment of widespread crisis, a state is reborn whose origins are linked to a process extraneous to the African continent and are of European origin.

The background to recent developments emphasizes the other aspect of this historical contradiction: Eritrea was a colonial state that did not become an independent state during the decolonization process, a unique case during decolonization (if we set aside Western Sahara). But the Mareb river that demarcated Eritrean borders can be seen as the only real border in the scramble for Africa, due to the fact that it was reconfirmed after the battle of Adwa in 1896. It was a real border settled between Ethiopia and Italy, a real colonial border, and the only one not to be recognized during the decolonization process. Eritrea was not considered by other African countries or by international diplomacy as a colonial border. This gave rise to a series of contrasts both within and outside the former Italian colony that led to a thirty-year struggle for independence and that only a few years ago allowed the emergence of an autonomous political entity.

Eritrea therefore reminds us of the origins of a state in Africa, but in a negative sense. All African states left their colonial past behind, except for Eritrea. The European origins of the state represent a unique reality in the political panorama of contemporary Africa. The state is an imported concept and has been imposed on African societies by foreign agents. But it has nevertheless survived until today and we can speak of a process of Africanization of the state. We are dealing with a unique phenomenon in the context of modern African politics: the foreign origin of the concept and at the same time its persistence for a long period. Only in the last decade has African

⁸ See I. TADDIA, Notes on Recent Italian Studies on Ethiopia and Eritrea, "Africana" (forthcoming).

politics undergone various large-scale crises that mark a moment of fundamental rupture at an institutional level. The centrality of the state has been lost, its power and prestige have in numerous cases been placed in doubt, and the regional hegemonies of many emerging African countries – the strongest economically speaking – have created new balances of power and new political structures. We have reached the end of a precise chapter in modern history and we are witnessing the development of new emerging African states that place under question the classic intervention of European powers in the African continent. Today, and to an ever increasing extent, the political game has taken on a truly African dimension.

Modern states in Africa first emerged as the result of the clash between Europe and Africa in the 19th century. They were the result of the extension into Africa of a European political model of parliamentary democracy, a model widespread in the 1960's after African independence, but which was then suddenly interrupted. The modern post-colonial state is now characterized by institutional crisis, the delegitimization of state power and the non-assimilation of European institutions. The artificiality of colonialism resulted in the artificiality of post-colonial states that today no longer survive. Contemporary African instability is the consequence of the imposition of a European model on a heterogeneous society. This is the result of the clash between Europe and Africa, a long-term consequence.

Given the fact that the construction of modern states in Africa is related to colonialism, post-colonial states have clearly revealed the crisis of this institution in Africa. The crisis is first of all characterized by a lack of legitimacy of the state. We can now see in contemporary Africa the real break-up of this institution. Nation-building was not successful; the optimism about a real unification of the country and the possibility for the modern leadership – the constructors of the nation – to be successful soon disappeared from African politics. In all African countries we can observe a real explosion of previous institutions that failed to create a viable and stable national unity.

I think that the weakness of nationalism and the rise of regionalism in contemporary Africa are the result of the failure of economic, political and constitutional developments in the 1960's, namely the failure of a precise institutional power, the independent post-colonial African state. The failure of nation-building in contemporary Africa is very clear. Therefore, the real question we must ask is: in Africa today do nations exist or do states exist? And this is true for Eritrea as well.

The Horn of Africa must be studied within this perspective; its problems are not a colonial issue, they are not a heritage of colonialism in a strict sense. They are problems related to the construction of a new state legitimacy, the legitimacy of the post-colonial state. The collapse of the state in

Somalia, the new state in Eritrea and the ethnic democracy in Ethiopia are different solutions to the explosion of the post-colonial state.

The crisis of the post-colonial state is therefore relatively recent in Africa; its disintegration and collapse remind us of the artificiality of the state, since its origins go back to colonialism. There is one important difference between other African countries and Eritrea: in the other countries national unity was imposed or created by the unitarian state in post-colonial times, whereas in Eritrea we can speak of a unity conquered during the 30 years of struggle, a unity first created by the Italians and then recreated under different conditions by the struggle against Ethiopia.

Regarding the nation/state issue we could say that it was the colonial state that created the nation.⁹ Africa's first nationalism found its basis in the territorial consciousness imposed by colonialism. A new identity was created inside the colonial borders that were also the new state borders. But the new identity created by colonialism was not able to maintain the unity of the various countries. In these terms, we must go back to the previous question, whether Eritrea is a nation or a state. In this case the nation-building is not a process that has developed from the colonial state in post-1960 African independence. This is the other aspect of what I have called an African contradiction: a colonial state that did not become an independent state. In Eritrea the process took place only recently in comparison to other African countries and I have seen the consequences of this phenomenon. Moreover, the recent war between Ethiopia and Eritrea since May 1998 has changed the terms of the problem.¹⁰

Methodology and historical research on the Horn

The second topic I wish to discuss here concerns the methodology of historical research. We have seen there is no modern Ethiopia, there is no colonial Eritrea

⁹ See the developments of this debate in J. MARKAKIS, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, London 1987; on nationalism and the new concept of territory under colonialism see: T. NEGASH, "Colonialismo italiano e nazionalismo eritreo", *Africa e Mediterraneo*, 1, 1996, 15–20.

¹⁰ I shall not go into the role of the 1998 war. For recent literature on this topic see: K. TRONVOLL – T. NEGASH, *Brothers at War: Making Sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War*, Oxford, J. Currey 2000; F. LE HOUEROU, *Ethiopie et Erythree: frères ennemis de la Corne de l'Afrique*, Paris, L'Harmattan 2000; J. ABBINK, "The Eritrean-Ethiopian Border Dispute", *African Affairs*, 389, 1998, 551–565; G. CIAMPI, "Cartographic Problems of the Eritrean-Ethiopian Border", *Africa*, 56, 2, 2001; U. CHELATI DIRAR, "Etiopia-Eritrea, le ragioni di un conflitto annunciato", *Afriche e Orienti*, 2, 1999, 13–20; F. BATTERA, "Il conflitto Etiopia-Eritrea: le ragioni "interne" e le conseguenze sugli equilibri regionali", *Relazioni internazionali*, 48, 1999, 63–67; F. GUAZZINI, "Riflessioni sulle identità di guerra nel cyberspazio: il caso eritreo-etiope", *Africa*, LVI, 4, 2001, 532–572.

as a separate history. For this reason, I have underlined the need to study the regional area as a whole. If we look at the panorama of historical research in Italy, there is a clear difference compared to the research done abroad. Scholars in Italy tend to study both areas together and not to divide them into two historiographical exercises, one addressed to Ethiopia and the other to Eritrea.

At the XIV International Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa, November 2000, I delivered a paper based on a discussion of recent Italian studies on Ethiopia and Eritrea that I would briefly like to mention here.¹¹ Historical research in Italy today is more flexible than before. Everybody knows that after the Second World War, Italy broke off its great tradition of historical research on the former Italian colonies. The tradition that linked Italy to the Horn of Africa was interrupted after the fall of Fascism and African colonies were completely cancelled from the collective memory. Few Italian scholars have since been involved in such studies. This has not happened in the rest of Europe. Other countries have kept alive a tradition of studies linked to their former colonies, a tradition that has also resulted in many projects, cooperation in various sectors and direct political intervention. All the connections that existed for the metropolis-colony still exist today. On the contrary, Italian historians did not examine Italian colonial policy seriously and after the Second World War political and economic links were brusquely interrupted and not taken up again until a new phase of cooperation was opened in the 1970s.

Recently, however, a new wave of scholars has emerged; unfortunately, few of them were present in the International Conference in Asmara in July 2001, as was the case in Addis Ababa at the International Conference in November 2000, but the Horn of Africa has taken on a new importance in the field of African studies in Italy. Now a new generation of scholars is active in many subjects of research and Italian colonialism has also received attention abroad: see, for instance, the book coming out by RUTH BEN GHIAT and MIA FULLER, *Italian Colonialism, a Reader*, forthcoming by St. Martin Press, New York, and the international meeting on Italian colonialism held in London in 2001.¹²

These new studies in Italy cover different disciplines and are not limited to the historical and philological tradition of Italian scholarship on Ethiopia. They introduce important new themes and areas of research; they also deal with social studies: anthropology, sociology, geography and the humanities in general, all disciplines that were not a significant component of previous Italian studies. More importantly – and I have already stressed this point –

¹¹ See the entire text of my presentation quoted in note 8.

¹² The conference was organized by the Italian Cultural Institute in London (November 30 – December 1, 2001) and was well attended by a number of international researchers on the former Italian colonies.

the new research concerns not only Eritrea but also Ethiopia, and of course it is difficult from a historical point of view to separate the two areas in modern studies. So scholars have to take a wider perspective when analysing the history of the Horn. We cannot consider Eritrea and Ethiopia separately as a specific unit of historical analysis, but we should consider the Horn of Africa as a specific historical entity to study. Precolonial history must be based on an African ground and a regional historical context.

I do not like to separate Eritrean and Ethiopian historiography, as it would be a complete nonsense: this is not a good point to discuss here. But this is not the case in contemporary literature. The two countries now tend to develop a separate field of research and construct different paradigms related to historical discourse to study their own history. In Europe and the United States, too, there is a tendency to separate these areas of historical research and create different associations. If we look at the international studies on the area, we can see there is a clear division between the two countries, a division that ought to be reconsidered by scholars. On the contrary, Italian research is more comprehensive and deserves attention. I do not have space to mention here all the areas of research active in Italy and their authors in detail. We can schematize recent Italian studies under at least three categories:

- The important tradition of historical and philological studies on Christian and Islamic Ethiopia (as well as Eritrea) has been continued in Naples and is very active today in a new generation of scholars – Bausi, Lusini, Gori,¹³ just to mention the most important. Archaeology is another component of the classical tradition still alive in Naples.
- The second area of research covers social studies, including law and anthropology, disciplines not particularly developed in colonial literature, where written sources and historical research tended to prevail. Not only people from the Christian highlands are studied, but the peripheral areas are an object of research conducted mainly by Bassi and Dore, whose studies also deserve attention for the relations between anthropology and colonialism, just as does the research done by Sorgoni, Barrera and Locatelli. A special mention should be given to geography and to the studies by Ciampi in the field of cartography and demography.
- The third area of research deals with political and historical matters. I shall just mention Guazzini, Lenci, Borruso and Labanca and their studies on colonial borders in historical perspective, colonial milieu and administration, religion and intellectual resistance to colonial rule.

¹³ For full reference to all works written by Italian scholars mentioned here, see the article quoted in note 8 above.

The current panorama is rich and promising. Moreover, it covers both modern Ethiopia and colonial Eritrea. The characteristic of Italian studies is to treat both countries equally. This topic was widely dealt with in my presentation in Addis Ababa last November. This is the same perspective as is found in the research we have been trying to carry out over the last two years at the University of Bologna and is still in progress. The project I am working on concentrates on an integrated regional area, the Red Sea coast, the Indian Ocean and the hinterland, with a view to analysing the development of coastal towns during the second half of the 19th century. This is just to underline the need to do research on an integrated area, to understand the dynamic of events and intercut the colonial borders.

The project entitled “Nomadic Settlements/Territorial Towns of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean in the 19th century” analyses the coastal settlements of Massawa and Zeila and the related areas of the hinterland in their historical and environmental context. We have studied the development of Zeila and Massawa and their respective relations with the interior, the Asmara and Harar areas, trying to compare patterns of trade and environmental contexts. The aim of the project is to offer a critical discussion and propose a critical re-reading of the historiography synthesized by the *Cambridge History of Africa*, that for both the Red Sea and Indian Ocean areas (former Italian and British colonies) emphasized the importance of the external pattern of trade with Arabia and Asia in general to explain the dynamics of coastal areas and the development of towns.¹⁴ This analysis concentrated mainly on the coastal cities as a product of a unique trading situation which had its origin in the pattern of Indian Ocean trade and whose orientation was exclusively seaward.

The extra-African influences were certainly important, but our perspective is more flexible. From our point of view, the importance of the political and economic dynamics of the interior of the continent appears very clear and we are trying to examine the pattern of trade and the development of a new urban milieu at the end of the 19th century, stressing the importance of this context: inter-regional trade, not only foreign trade, pointing out the significance of the hinterland in accumulating social wealth. The development of the coastal towns is closely related to a flexible African context. We would like to reassess the whole area in the light of an African background: the African hinterland is important, as well, in the emergence of a new type of town. Massawa was embedded in a bulk of economic and historical relationships connecting the near and the far hinterland (the Sudan and Ethiopian highlands), the north-east African coast and southern Arabia. The city

¹⁴ See in the *Cambridge History of Africa*, Vols. 5, 6, 7 Cambridge University Press 1987, the details related to eastern Africa in modern times.

was formed as a centre for social relations, closely linked to the Ethiopia-Sudan border. Economic exchanges based on trade (slaves, ivory, skins, coffee, guns) should be taken into consideration in the development of new territorial unities. The urban feature is related to the ecology and demography of the areas of the interiors. The structure of urban power controls the resources created through the development of new commercial routes. The particular form of the human settlements – ranging from nomadism to territorialism – depends on the type of regional exchanges.

The research is based on a regional dimension and is not strictly confined to present states. We have developed a data base of published and unpublished literature with the help of the Italian bibliographer Giancarlo Stella.¹⁵ At this stage in the project, we have to start exploiting African sources and we would like to encourage other scholars to join the project.

The themes involved are: the ecology of the area at the end of slavery, the importance of inter-regional networks based on slave trade and the role of agricultural products, the transformation of coastal towns from “nomadic” settlements to territorial towns during colonialism, and finally the role of the hinterland in the construction of a new accumulation of wealth linked to the urban milieu.

I would like to stress here the regional dimension of the project. The great historical tradition in Italy of studies on Ethiopia should be resumed and systematically continued. This tradition has never made a division between the history of Ethiopia and that of Eritrea. History should be analysed on a regional basis, and we cannot nowadays speak of two distinct histories, of Ethiopia and of Eritrea. I do not see any good reason to separate Ethiopian and Eritrean studies from an academic point of view. Future research needs to study the entire area as a component of the history of the Horn of Africa in modern times. In many respects national historiography has to face this problem and put the modern history of both countries into a new context: the context of a critical research on the past.

Eritrea has the right to a national history, like Ethiopia, but this fact should not constitute a negative factor for historical research. Historians from both countries should come together on a ground of common ideas and study various aspects in a flexible way, without preconceived ideas. Reconstructing modern history goes beyond the reconstruction of the history of the Ethiopian states and the Eritrean state respectively. It is not a question of analysing the historical traditions of the two autonomous states.

¹⁵ Of great utility for bibliographical research and critical support is the work by Giancarlo Stella. The librarian collects a great amount of items related to the colonial period and recent literature on the Horn.

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Given the political situation, there is no communication at the moment between scholars from Addis Ababa and Asmara Universities. Nonetheless, we must be optimistic about the development of political events and the composition of the present conflict. And this again is another case where politics plays an important role in determining the orientation of academic work. This is nothing new: we have seen similar phenomena in history. This is a real challenge for the future.

As historians of Africa we need to work from a different perspective. State boundaries were created by colonialism. But precolonial history must be based on an African ground. Eritrea must be studied in the context of the Horn of Africa, and the Horn of Africa must, in turn, be analysed in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa. On the other hand, Ethiopian studies tend very often to be a completely separate field of research in African history. Ethiopian studies must be more flexible and open to exchange and debate with scholars of other African areas. So far Ethiopian scholars have not worked seriously on Eritrean history. I stressed this point at the above-mentioned International Conference in Addis Ababa and I would like to reiterate it here. No significant research on Eritrea has been done at the History Department of Addis Ababa University. I hope that Eritrean scholars and historians will develop another approach. We need confrontation, debate and lively discussion and real academic research on both countries in Asmara and Addis Ababa Universities.

Summary

The article develops some reflections on present-day Eritrea in the light of the colonial past and in the context of modern Ethiopia. If we consider Eritrea and its path towards independence, some differences and analogies emerge in comparison with other African colonies. The Eritrean independence is taking place today in a very specific context in post-colonial Africa. It is not a simple case of delayed decolonization, postponed by 30 years with respect to other former African colonies. The history of Eritrea must be studied within the colonial context: colonialism created a national identity, but Eritrea is a colony that did not become an independent state. This phenomenon can be attributed to various causes which I will try to underline.

The process of state formation in Eritrea raises some problems for historians. The construction of a new political legitimacy is strictly connected to the birth of a national historiography in the country. I would like to examine in a critical way the process of writing history in contemporary Eritrea. Reconstructing the history of the past goes beyond the reconstruction of the history of the Eritrean state today. We have to consider the entire area – the Horn of Africa – in the pre-colonial period. The paper discusses the interrelation between the creation of the state and the national historiography.