

FAITH IN THE NATION:
EXAMINING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ERITREAN MUSLIMS
IN THE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT, 1946-1961

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This thesis titled
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EXAMINING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ERITREAN MUSLIMS
IN THE NATIONALIST MOVEMENT, 1946-1961

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Abstract

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FAITH IN THE NATION: EXAMINING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ERITREAN
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This paper focuses on the influence that Eritrean Muslim activists and their respective political organizations had on the development of the nationalist movement between the coming of the British Military Administration and the outbreak of the armed liberation struggle against Ethiopia in the early 1960s. Taking form in the midst of Britain's post-World War II occupation of the region, numerous politically active Muslim groups throughout Eritrea developed a broad nationalist ideology that was seen as an anathema to the interests of Ethiopia and its allies. Although pro-nationalist political activity was severely marginalized with the coming of Ethiopian authority, first through covert operations and later through the guise of the UN-backed Ethiopian-Eritrean Federation, many activists proved ready and willing to engage the opponents of Eritrean independence with more proactive measures, including the establishment of the first armed-resistance groups. In the process, these early activists helped lay the seeds for the independence movement's eventual triumph in the early 1990s.

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To Laura

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Abbreviations

BMA	British Military Administration
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ELM	Eritrean Liberation Movement
FLN	Front de Libération Nationale
IEUP	Independent Eritrea United with Ethiopia Party
IML	Independent Moslem League
LUP	Liberal Unionist Party
SDF	Sudanese Defense Force
MLWP	Moslem League of the Western Province
NEA	New Eritrean Association
NEPIP	New Eritrean Pro-Italy Party
NMPM	National Moslem Party of Massawa
PLC	Party for the Love of Country
SUEE	Society for the Unification of Eritrea with Ethiopia

Introduction

“People are loyal to ethnic, national, or other imagined communities not because they were born into them, but because such foci of loyalty promise to offer something deemed meaningful, valuable, or useful.”¹ In these words, Thomas Hylland Eriksen articulated the ever present desire of peoples to create and promote a tangible identity as a means of empowerment. These intrinsic motivations have, historically, been manifested through nationalist movements that have sought to attain cultural and political autonomy from entities perceived as both illegitimate and oppressive.

In the case of Eritrea, Africa’s newest state, its citizenry has demonstrated an astounding capacity to maintain and promote a national identity in the face of overwhelming political, social, and military challenges during the past sixty years. This paper will argue that many of the initial endeavors for Eritrean independence were rooted in the philosophies and political activism of members of Eritrea’s Islamic community and their respective political organizations. The contributions of these historical actors have often been examined within the context of representing notable but not necessarily essential factors in the independence movement. This project will suggest that Muslim political activism was not a mere byproduct of Eritrean civil discontent, but a fundamental component in the development of Eritrean nationalism and the independence movement.

¹ Thomas Hylland Eriksen. “A Non-ethnic State for Africa?” In *Ethnicity and Nationalism in Africa: Constructivist Approaches and Contemporary Politics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc., 1999), p. 55.

Research Question

The importance of the topic at hand has helped frame the guiding research question for this project: What were the contributions of Eritrean Muslims in the initial period between the arrival of the British Colonial Administration and the outbreak of armed hostilities between Eritrean nationalists and the Ethiopian state? Furthermore, how did the actions of Eritrean Muslims direct the course of nationalism within post-World War II Eritrea until the beginning of the movement's ideological fracturing in the early 1960s? Based on findings from the research that has been conducted, this paper affirms that politically-active Eritrean Muslims and their respective organizations represented the largest and most proactive segment of the nationalist movement during this period. This development was largely due to the social and political realities experienced by this demographic, which experienced varying degrees of disenfranchisement and outright discrimination at the hands of the supporters of union between Eritrea and Ethiopia, as well as by the indirect actions of Ethiopia's international supporters.

This project has utilized two lenses in examining the role of Eritrean Muslims in the early stages of the nationalist movement. The first lens focuses specifically on the period of the British Military Administration in Eritrea. Examination of this period is crucial to understanding the effects of external forces, primarily the British colonial administration and, to a lesser extent, the remaining Italian elements on the development of a greater political consciousness among Eritreans of the Islamic faith. The second, much narrower lens focuses on the role of Eritrean Muslims in developing, organizing,

and carrying out multiple resistance movements in the years immediately following the Eritrean federation with Ethiopia in 1952.

Framework

In order to conceptualize the Eritrean independence movement as a truly nationalist struggle, we must first understand and appreciate the impact of the Eritrean experience under colonialism, through the successive Italian, British, and finally Ethiopian regimes. In the relatively brief period in which there has been a sizeable quantity of research conducted on the nation, the most common justification of the colonial powers, argued both directly and indirectly through the work of affiliated scholars, was that there was not any feasible Eritrean “culture” that could be identified and accurately analyzed.² This phenomenon strongly reflects Franz Fanon’s theory of the colonial system serving as a force to promote “regionalism” and “separatism” as a means of furthering colonial domination through a disunited native population.³ Accordingly, the colonial authorities demonstrated a predilection to categorize Eritreans as a mixture of competing factions based purely on differences of region, language, and religion.

In fact, inhabitants of the region often were identified as “Tigrinya-speaking highland Christians” or “lowland, Arabic speaking Muslims” rather than simply as Eritreans. This realization also serves to emphasize Fanon’s assertion that “a national culture under colonial domination is a contested culture whose destruction is sought in

² See Richard Reid, “The Challenge of the Past: The Quest for Historical Legitimacy in Independent Eritrea,” *History in Africa* 28 (2001): 239-272; George A. Lipsky, *Ethiopia: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture*. New Haven: Hraf Press, 1962; Haggai Erlich, *The Struggle over Eritrea, 1962-1978*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983. As will be shown, this reasoning was used to further the claim that because there was not an inherently unified indigenous culture, Eritrea was a byproduct, a creation of the colonial system, thereby illegitimizing any Eritrean claims to independence.

³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, Inc. 1963), p. 73.

systematic fashion.”⁴ Indeed, as the later evidence will demonstrate, any indications or notions of Eritrean nationalism were viciously suppressed under colonial authority, particularly during the period of Ethiopian rule from 1952 to 1962.

The usurpation of Eritrean sovereignty helped create a political situation in which the Islamic faith became one of the avenues for Eritreans to utilize as a tool in promoting a national identity.⁵ The later development of open hostilities between Eritrea’s Muslim and Christian populations should also be understood as a symptom of the power of Ethiopian colonialism. As Fanon observes, “inside a single nation, religion splits up the people into different spiritual communities, all of them kept up and stiffened by colonialism and its instruments.”⁶ The eventual hostilities, which in many instances developed into full-blown acts of political and social violence, were largely supported by an apparatus of Ethiopian-backed “unionists” whose ultimate goal was to alienate Eritrea’s Muslim population and create popular support among Christians for a union with the Ethiopian state.⁷

A Historiography of Perceptions

Accounts of Eritrean Muslims who contributed to the nationalist movement have often received mention in the work of the many historians concerned with recent history

⁴ Ibid., p. 191.

⁵ It should be stated that Eritrea is not the first country to have experienced a nationalist movement drawn from the cultural importance of the Islamic faith. Ernest Gellner, in his work *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion*, emphasized the importance of Islam within such a colonial framework, citing that “Islam provides a national identity, notably in the context of the struggle with colonialism—the modern Muslim ‘nation’ is often simply the sum-total of Muslims on a given territory.” Gellner’s position enunciates the tendency of nationalists to use Islamic theology and culture as a bridging point among different peoples, all of whom, as in the case of the Eritrea, represented varied segments of the population. See Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 15.

⁶ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 191.

⁷ As a result, the Ethiopian government served an important role as the major financial backer and supporter of all diplomatic and political actions that impeded the goals of Eritrean nationalists.

in the Horn of Africa. However, the standard historiography has been closely associated with a specific political ideology that has largely sympathized with what can be termed “Ethiopianist regional history” in which the Eritrean struggle has been perceived more as a provincial conflict within the affairs of the Ethiopian state rather than as a significant and legitimate struggle for independence by the people of Eritrea as a distinct cultural and political entity. This was a historical assumption that pervaded much of the literature that was published before the advent of Eritrean independence. Many of the most prominent and accomplished authors of Ethiopian history, including Edward Ullendorf, Richard Pankhurst, and the late Harold Marcus, have failed to invest a meaningful analysis in the basic motivations of Eritrean nationalists and instead have provided over-generalized accounts of the civil, religious, and political tension that Eritrea experienced under Ethiopian control.

In the past three decades, a number of works have focused on the struggle for Eritrean independence, including notable texts as *Behind the War in Eritrea, Never Kneel Down: Drought, Development, and Liberation in Eritrea*, as well as Don Connell’s exceptional first hand account of the movement entitled *Against All Odds*. However, many of these publications have provided only scant analysis of Islam and Eritrean Muslims as integral elements within the struggle. Consequently, there has yet to be extensive research conducted with Islam as a focal point in the movement for independence. Ironically, some of the most comprehensive and insightful works that have given a considerable analysis of Islam as a force in Eritrean political development were authored by British colonial officials serving in the region between 1941 and 1952.

With his work *A Short History of Eritrea*, Brigadier Stephen Longrigg was the first to author an extensive analysis of Eritrean history and culture in the post-World War II period. Longrigg, as the Chief Administrator for Eritrea from 1942-44, provided an extensive history of Islam's influence on Eritrea through his accounts of the incursions of Turkish forces into greater Ethiopia during the 16th century. More important, however, was Longrigg's elaboration on the role that past migrations and armed conflict had in shaping the character of "modern" Eritrea. Given Longrigg's position as the highest-ranking British official stationed in Eritrea during the first two years of British occupation, his account serves as one of the most intimate and detailed texts available regarding the British administration's efforts to assess and categorize the region's considerable ethnic and religious divisions.

Longrigg's colonial narrative is augmented by the work of another Eritrean-based British official, Kennedy Trevaskis. In *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition, 1941-52*, Trevaskis, who served in the British Administration of Eritrea between 1941 and 1950, provided a much deeper account of the dynamics of Muslim political activism and nationalism. Trevaskis confronted the complexity of Islamic political development in his focus on the early formation of political parties and factions in the aftermath of the Second World War. Unlike Longrigg, whose prose was more concerned with telling the general narrative of Eritrean history, Trevaskis presents far more detail in his analysis of the social and religious components of postwar Eritrean society, focusing on the agendas and actions of many of the independence movement's most ardent supporters. Trevaskis' work also demonstrates a greater understanding for the social context of the movement's

figures, investigating their economic resources and organizational contributions to the early movement.⁸

The limited examination that has focused on Islam as a force within Eritrean political discourse has been largely confined to past investigations concerning the history of Eritrean political parties, which developed throughout the early and mid-1940s. The work of Lloyd Ellingson has been particularly beneficial in this facet of research. Ellingson's 1977 article "The Emergence of Political Parties in Eritrea, 1941-1950," and his 1986 PhD dissertation "Eritrea: Separatism and Irredentism, 1941-1985," are invaluable studies that have attempted to categorize and explain the primary objectives of the early Muslim-dominated political parties, particularly groups such as the Moslem League.

In recent years a number of Eritrean scholars have elaborated on the nature of the independence movement. One of the more noteworthy of these which has demonstrated an increased awareness of the importance of the Islamic component in the struggle is Tekeste Negash's *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*, published in 1997. *The Federal Experience* sheds light on the specific political movements that developed during the late 1950s, particularly within Eritrea's Moslem League, as national sovereignty eroded during Eritrea status as a "semi-autonomous" region within the UN-backed Ethiopian Federation. While Negash's study is written from a decidedly "pro-Ethiopian" perspective that consciously tries to downplay the degree of true Eritrean nationalism, it

⁸ Although written from a distinctly pro-British perspective, Trevaskis' text illustrates the growing importance of political organizations as a means of asserting ethnic and religious power during the British occupation.

nonetheless represents one of the more comprehensive accounts of the importance and influence of Eritrean Muslims during the later stages of the Ethiopian-Eritrean federation.

Approaching the issue of nationalism from much different perspective, Jordan Gebre-Medhin's 1989 work *Peasants & Nationalism in Eritrea* places less emphasis on the external political and military events relating to the nationalist movement. Instead, Gebre-Medhin, writing as a cultural anthropologist, focuses on the rise of political consciousness among the Eritrean peasantry, particularly the region's predominantly Muslim lowland inhabitants as well as the urban supporters of labor rights, and how this ultimately served as the major catalyst in resisting Eritrea's incorporation into the Ethiopian state.

One of the most recent publications to explore the importance of Islamic political activism within the independence struggle in greater detail is David Poole's *From Guerrillas to Government: The Eritrean People's Liberation Front*. Poole's 2001 text closely follows the influence of entities such as Sufi brotherhoods and Muslim peasant leaders on the facilitation of a popular consensus for Eritrea's independence. While Poole's analysis finds some conflict between the studies of Negash and Gebre-Medhin, *From Guerrillas to Government* presents a coherent narrative on the gradual coalescence of religious communities from the Christian and Islamic faiths into identifiable political groups. Poole, more than any of the previous researchers, demonstrates a strong understanding of the role that Islamic custom played in the growth of political support for independence. The author makes ample reference to the conflict between *Sharia* and "customary law," as well as the power struggles between Eritrea's state authorities and

the traditional tribal leaders of Muslim communities. Poole's work presents an incredibly detailed and elaborate explanation of how the Islamic faith ultimately served as a vital tool in the development of Eritrean nationalism.⁹

While there have been other works that have highlighted the importance of Islamic activism during the national struggle, most notably Michela Wrong's *I Didn't Do it for You* and Roy Pateman's *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning*, these works present a largely generic account of the Islamic component within the independence movement. Nevertheless, these works, as well as other related texts, have been utilized within this paper for their contribution in augmenting the overall historical narrative of the independence movement through their strength as detailed, inclusive studies of the social and political aspects within Eritrean society.

Methodology

In addition to the utilization of previously written books and articles, this study also makes use of many primary sources originating from the period. Particularly valuable have been official reports and correspondence emanating from within the British Foreign Office between 1944 and 1960. As the overseeing administrative power following the end of Italian occupation, the British administration stands as one of the

⁹ In addition to the work of scholars examining the political and social history of Eritrea, other investigators, while focusing on the regional history of the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, have conducted research that has provided limited but valuable insight into the importance of Muslim activists and Islamic political consciousness as aspects of Eritrean nationalism. These works, including Saul Kelly's *Cold War in the Desert* and William Roger Louis' *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-1951*, help to frame the Eritrean struggle for independence within a larger Cold War context. Consequently, the authors have presented the developments of Islamic political activism in Eritrea as being related to the larger phenomenon of "Arab Nationalism" that emerged within predominantly Muslim states during the 1950s. By *deemphasizing* the Eritrean struggle as an inherently African development, Kelly and Louis help to examine the independence struggle through a wider historical lens that previous authors, mostly African historians and anthropologists, have generally failed to do.

few bastions of well-organized documentation concerning the cultural, political, and economic developments in Eritrea during the period. Additionally, archival research has been conducted in the historical records of the United Nations during the period in which the international body assessed, deliberated, and delineated Eritrea's political fate. This project has also incorporated the testimony of a number of Eritrean Muslims who, as scholars and experts on the independence struggle, have been willing to discuss many of the intricacies of political activism and nationalism that took place during the period.¹⁰ The pages that follow are an attempt to incorporate all of these avenues of research while constructing a critical examination of this era of Eritrean history, sufficiently focusing on the contributions of many of the Eritrean Muslim nationalists who helped forge one of the most intriguing and improbable nationalist movements of the late 20th century.

¹⁰ These individuals have, in some cases, elaborated on their own experiences to demonstrate the importance of the historical events and trends within Eritrea's nationalist movement.

Chapter 1: Eritrea and Islam

Before delving into how and why Islamic political activism in Eritrea served as the impetus of the larger nationalist movement, it is important to first appreciate the nature of Islam within the region as well as how the region's unique diversity has effected its religious dynamics. In African as well as Islamic studies, Eritrea seldom receives mention as a historically unique society amid the pantheon of the more notable "hot spots" within the African continent, particularly within the Horn of Africa. This can, in part, be explained by the fact that Eritrea is one of the few modern states within the general region that does not feature a substantial Muslim majority among its population.

1.1 A Curious Composite

Unlike Somalia, Djibouti, and to a lesser extent, Ethiopia, Eritrea is a nation which, according to the most recent estimates, has a religious makeup that is almost evenly divided between those who identify themselves as Sunni Muslims and those who adhere to the teachings of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church.¹¹ With a population of approximately four million people comprising nine distinct ethnicities, Eritrea is frequently referred to as a mosaic of diverse cultures.¹² An important aspect of this cultural diversity has been the significance that Islam has wielded throughout much of Eritrea's social and political history. In order to better comprehend the importance Islam and its eventual role in promoting the ideals of Eritrean nationalism, it is crucial to

¹¹ Richard Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980), p. 3.

¹² For a more detailed analysis of Eritrea's population estimates, see Ghirmai Negash, *A History of Tigrinya Literature in Eritrea: The Oral and The Written, 1890-1991* (Leiden: Research School CNWS, 1999).

understand the significance of the historical relationship between Muslims and Christians in the region.¹³

For centuries, Eritrea's strategic position along the Red Sea coast made the region easily susceptible to the external influences of numerous cultural migrations which introduced Islamic peoples from Arabia, North Africa, Yemen, Oman, as well as the Persian Gulf. In particular, the port cities of Massawa and Assab represented two valuable points of regional trade and commerce. As such, merchants from across the Islamic world took up residence on the Eritrean lowland coastal region. By the end of the 11th century, the region was also situated in the vicinity of the Christian-dominated Zagwe Dynasty which developed southward in the Abyssinian highlands. As a result, Eritrea, in the words of historian Richard Reid, became a "region where the fringes met: the highland fringe of Christian Abyssinia and the lowland, coastal fringe of the Islamic Middle East."¹⁴ This territorial dynamic had a tremendous effect on political and military events in the region during the early 16th century, as Ottoman forces under the direction of Sultan Selim I (r. 1512-1520) annexed Egypt and spread their military presence along the Red Sea coast as far south as Massawa.¹⁵

While Ottoman forces were able to take control of Massawa, their influence was initially confined to the thin coastal strip on Eritrea's Red Sea shoreline. By 1530, a much more widespread movement of Muslims into the region occurred through the conquests of the Imam of Harrar, known as Ahmad bin Ibrahim or Ahmad Gran ("the

¹³ See Stephen Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945).

¹⁴ Richard Reid, *The Challenge of the Past: The Quest for Historical Legitimacy in Independent Eritrea*, *History in Africa* 28 (2001): p. 246.

¹⁵ Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea*, p. 44.

left-handed”). Under Ahmad Gran’s leadership, Islamic armies spread north and north-west through out the former Abyssinian kingdom. The territorial expansion was so dramatic that by 1536, with the exception of scattered communities of Christians who had sought refuge in isolated sections of the Abyssinian highlands, the majority of the area that that now constitutes Eritrea and Ethiopian was under Muslim rule.¹⁶

Although Ahmad Gran was eventually killed in battle against Portuguese forces in 1543, the region would continue to be dominated by an Islamic presence; Ottoman forces claimed Massawa in 1557, and soon acquired considerable control over the Eritrean coastal plain. Simultaneously, a Muslim people from central Sudan, the Fung, began to expand their territorial domain into western Eritrea, mainly through Gash-Setit and the Baraka Lowlands. In addition, the coastal region south of Massawa, known as the *Danakil*, experienced an influx of Hamitic tribal peoples associated with the Sultans of Aussa, who were dependents of the Somali Kings of Adal.¹⁷ While the Ottoman presence was considerable in many of the ports along the Red Sea shoreline, Ottoman forces, less concerned with the military conquest of the less profitable interior, did not pursue or support any substantial efforts to establish an Islamic domination further inland than the immediate coastal region.¹⁸

It is estimated that, by the end of the 16th century, as much as one third of the total population of the Abyssinian highlands, the former heartland of the Axumite dynasty,

¹⁶ David Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 114. According to Robinson, during Ahmad Gran’s incursions into Abyssinia, his forces converted churches to mosques, destroyed Christian “idols,” and confiscated grain, cattle, and other provisions.

¹⁷ G.K. N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition: 1941-52* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 6.

¹⁸ Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History*, p. 14.

was composed of practicing Muslims. In addition, a number of smaller kingdoms developed in the region that now encompasses Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia. The proximity of these small, trade-based seaside kingdoms to the Hijaz, Yemen, and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, according to historian David Robinson, made for a “relatively peaceful process of islamization.”¹⁹

1.2 Islamic Ethnicities

According to S.F. Nadel, the history of Eritrea is one of “constant migrations-immigrations from without and migrations from place to place within the country.”²⁰ The presence of Arab, African, and Turkish cultures all had an important effect on the region, as this variety of Islamic peoples, consisting of both agriculturalists and pastoralists, helped to create a heavily cosmopolitan cultural identity throughout the region. By the late 19th century, these invasions and migrations contributed to the formation of a number of unique Eritrean ethnic groups that professed the Islamic faith; many of these would eventually play an important role in the struggle for Eritrean independence.

One of the most important and influential groups was—and is—the Tigre. Residing in Eritrea’s western lowlands, northern highlands, and northeastern lowlands, the Tigre are predominantly Muslim in orientation, and trace their origins back several centuries to the Arabian traders who settled and married natives in the major settlements of Massawa and Harqiqo.²¹ Another important and predominantly Muslim group are the Afar, a Cushitic-speaking people inhabiting the *Dankalia*. Organized into small clan

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 113

²⁰ S.F. Nadel, “Land Tenure on the Eritrean Plateau,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 16 (January 1946): p. 2.

²¹ David Poole, *From Guerillas to Government: The Eritrean People’s Liberation Front* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001), p. 8.

groups, they have dominated the southern desert coastal region between the port cities of Massawa and Assab since the 16th century. As Sunni Muslims, the Afar provided much support to Ahmad Gran in his initial invasion of Abyssinia in the mid-16th century.²²

The Beni-Amir, as one of the largest ethnic groups within Eritrea, represents one of the most intriguing groups of Muslim inhabitants in the region. Originally practicing a caste system that was divided between the ruling *nabtab* and the subjugated *hedareb*, the Beni-Amir's mix of agro-pastoralism flourished among the 17-21 tribal subgroups throughout the area. Speaking a variety of languages including Beja, Tigre, and Arabic, the predominantly Sunni Muslim groups were united both by religion and by common origins in the borderlands of southern Sudan.²³ Likewise, two additional peoples, the Kunama of western Eritrea and the Saho, found in the central highlands, have also played significant roles in development of Islam through out Eritrea.

Residing in settled peasant communities, mainly in the modern-day province of Gash- Setit, the Kunama are Nilotic speakers that have been exposed to Christian, Muslim, as well as animist religious influences. Additionally, as an agricultural people, the Kunama have come into conflict with the more pastoralist Beni-Amir, resulting in a history of animosity and conflict that would ultimately encourage many Kunama to fight for the Ethiopian government against members of the Beni-Amir during the struggle for independence.²⁴ The Saho, found mainly in the foothills of the modern Akalai Guzai province and in the Tigray province in present-day Ethiopia, are a Cushitic speaking

²² George A. Lipsky, *Ethiopia: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture* (New Haven: HRAF Press, 1962), p. 12.

²³ David Poole, *From Guerillas to Government*, p. 9. See S.F. Nadel, "Notes on Beni-Amer Society." *Sudan Notes and Records* 26(1): pp. 51-94.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

people that, like the Beni-Amir, practice both agro-pastoralism and settled agriculture. An overwhelmingly Muslim people, the Saho have been historically organized into four main tribes: the Assorta, Miniferi, Hazu, and Debremela. In addition, since the period of Ottoman conquest in the 16th century, the agro-pastoral Saho have come into close contact with the Christian Tigrinya population in Akalai Guzai, causing a considerable degree of friction as the two peoples fought over land and grazing rights.²⁵

A final noteworthy group are the Jiberti, who, although not defined by any specific linguistic or cultural origin, are often identified by their professions as merchants, traders, and businessmen. Descended from settlers from Abyssinia, the Jiberti were largely excluded by Christian Abyssinian society despite the fact that they were a Tigrinya-speaking people. According to Lidwien Kapteijns, Christians would not eat with them, drink from cups they had used, or even eat meat that had been slaughtered by Muslims. Additionally, it was common for Christians to greet Muslims with the left hand—a sign of contempt—and with the derogatory terms of *naddade* (merchant) or *elsam*.²⁶ Because of Imperial Ethiopian prohibitions against landownership for Muslims, the Jiberti became entrepreneurs, establishing a strong presence as traders within the larger towns and villages of Eritrea, including Massawa, Keren, and Asmara. According to David Poole, the Jiberti became the most “economically advanced” of all the region’s Muslim communities.²⁷

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Lidwien Kapteijns, “Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa.” In *The History of Islam in Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000), p. 230.

²⁷ David Poole, *From Guerillas to Government*, p. 11. For a more comprehensive historical analysis of the Jiberti, see J. Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).

The unique character of Islam practiced by these different peoples was strongly influenced by the intercultural travel of Muslim scholars and mystics from Egypt, Arabia, Yemen, and other reaches of the Islamic world. Beginning with the Islamic “revival” in the early 19th century, modern Islam within Eritrea developed in the lowlands through the expansion of a number of divergent *turuq*, or Sufi brotherhoods.²⁸ Basing much of their creed and spiritual practices on the teachings and leadership of local *faqīhs*, these brotherhoods also managed to retain close ties with factions well outside of the general region.²⁹ Generally speaking, the region was dominated by growth of two specific Sufi orders, the ‘Ad Shaykh and the Khatmiyya, both of whom were responsible for a significant amount of religious revival that took place among the Tigre, Saho, and Bilen-speaking communities during the first half of the 19th century.³⁰

These brotherhoods, developing their ideologies through close-knit community structures and “clan confederations,” helped in the dissemination of Islamic learning and law as well as in establishing contact with centers of study across the Islamic world, including Al-Azhar University in Cairo, an institution that was to play an important role in the struggle for Eritrean independence during the 1950s. Additionally, a number of smaller Sufi sects, including the Bayt Shaykh Mahmud, Faqih Harak, Bayt Khalīfa, Ad Mu’allim, and ‘Ad Darqī also established strong connections within the lowland communities. By the mid-19th century, a variety of *turuq* were established throughout most of the highly populated areas, including the cities of Massawa, Hirgigo, and Keren

²⁸ Jonathan Miran, “A Historical Overview of Islam in Eritrea,” *Dis Welt des Islams* (2005): p. 184.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

where the brotherhoods expanded their influence through missionary work as well as through the influence of prosperous of Sufi merchants.³¹

Though the aforementioned peoples have, historically, differed widely in their origin as well as in their cultural and religious characteristics, all of the abovementioned groups shared two essential qualities; first, each featured a sizable Muslim majority, which inevitably set the populace apart as outsiders in the eyes of the imperial Ethiopian regime. Secondly, unlike the highland Christian peoples of the region, Eritrea's Muslim groups, by the end of the 19th century, had developed deep-seated reservations towards the possibility of being ruled under any local authority that was allied to the Orthodox Church, whose domination under the Ethiopian clergy had been established for centuries.³² Consequently, as Ethiopian claims over Eritrea grew during the mid-20th century and the imperial cunning of the Ethiopian state increased, it would be these Muslim communities that would form much of the nucleus of the nationalist movement.

³¹ Ibid., p. 190.

³² Khalid Beshir. Interview by Joseph Venosa. July, 2006.

Chapter 2: British Presence and the Beginnings of Political activity, 1946-1949

In early 1943 Sir Douglas Newbold, the Civil Secretary for British occupied Sudan, while conducting a tour of Eritrea, commented:

It would be happier for them [the Moslem tribes of Western Eritrea] and no trouble for us [the Sudan government] to take these two or three districts into Sudan, and let the Christian and Tigrinya speaking districts be reunited to their kinsfolk in Ethiopia.³³

Newbold's observations demonstrate the recurring incongruity within the British colonial administration as Great Britain presided over Eritrea's transition from a former Italian colony to an eventual "autonomous" region of the Ethiopian state. While Great Britain assumed responsibility for supervising the administrative and military affairs of the region following Italy's defeat at the Battle of Keren in April of 1941, British officials were seemingly unable and unwilling to provide a consistent administrative policy regarding Eritrea's political future as well as an adequate political apparatus that could neutralize the civil tension that developed between Eritrea's Christian and Muslim inhabitants.

In his post-war analysis of Eritrea's ethnic and cultural makeup, Stephen Longrigg countered the simplicity of Newbold's observation, stating that "Muslim elements" were found throughout Eritrea's largest settlements, particularly in the predominantly Christian cities of Asmara and Massawa. Longrigg identified the majority of these urban Eritrean Muslims as being among the Jiberti, estimating their numbers to have been approximately 30,000.³⁴ Longrigg also observed, "they all speak Tigrinya, some also Arabic" and were, in general, "richer, more progressive, and more public-spirited than

³³ K.D.D. Henderson, *The Making of the Modern Sudan* (London: Faber, 1953), p. 335.

³⁴ Stephen H. Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), p. 163.

their Christian fellow citizens.”³⁵ Despite Longrigg’s keen observations, the 11 year period of British rule in Eritrea saw the colonial power’s simplistic view of the region and its inhabitants manifest itself in a number of diplomatic policies that ultimately served to alienate Eritrea’s Muslim communities and create bitterness and division between Eritrea’s Christian and Muslim population. This chapter will discuss how the British presence within Eritrea-particularly between April of 1941 and the conclusion of the Four Power Commission in 1948-had a tremendous influence in encouraging political activism among Eritrea’s Muslim communities while civil and political relations between most Muslims and Christians deteriorated. Likewise, this period of inter-religious conflict should also be viewed as the most crucial stage in which Islamic-oriented factions, in an attempt to safeguard the interests of their respective communities, began to develop into mainstream political organizations that ultimately came to influence the armed independence struggle that began in the early 1960s.

2.1 The British Role in Eritrea

Throughout the period of British trusteeship, the polarization between Eritrea’s Christians, who were far more receptive to the idea of being incorporated into the Kingdom of Ethiopia, and the region’s Muslim traders and serfs, who, collectively, were fearful of being persecuted if absorbed by Ethiopia, was manifested in each group’s own particular displeasure towards the British Military Administration (BMA).³⁶ The post-war hostilities were largely the product of the BMA’s faltering policies, policies that helped lay the seeds for disastrous conflict between Muslim and Christian residents,

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Michela Wrong, *I Didn't do It For You: How the World Betrayed a Small African Nation* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005), p. 103.

particularly in the larger cities of Asmara, Keren, and Massawa. One of the initial British-led strategies that created civil discontent was the administration's decision to generate increased revenue from the former Italian colony by imposing a series of new taxes on the general population.

Because the Italian colonial government in Eritrea had previously kept the burden of taxation on the region's European residents and had only required indigenous Eritreans to pay a marginal "native tribute," the British administration was faced with the task of sustaining Eritrea's civil and economic infrastructure as Italian settlers left Eritrea in increasingly large numbers after 1941.³⁷ Faced with the economic shortfall, the administration settled on making native Eritreans contribute their "fair share of revenue" by implementing taxes on income, property, municipal, as well as school and hospital fees.³⁸

Due to the fact that Muslims represented a substantial majority of Eritrea's merchant class as traders and entrepreneurs, and because of the fact that the prices on goods and services dramatically increased and remained exceedingly high during the early years of Britain's occupation, Eritrea's Christian residents gradually began to view their Muslim counterparts with a combination of envy and fear, going as far as to even refer to Eritreans of the Islamic faith simply as "Arabs." Former British administrator and author Kennedy Trevaskis described the developments in clear terms, stating, "that

³⁷ In April of 1941 it was estimated that roughly 70,000 Italians resided in Eritrea, mainly Asmara. By 1952, Kennedy Trevaskis' estimated that there were roughly 17,000 remaining residents. For additional figures see Thomas Killion, *Workers Capital and the state in the Ethiopian Region*. Stanford: PhD thesis, Stanford University.

³⁸ G.K. N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition: 1941-52* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 44.

Arabs should be permitted to profiteer at Eritrean expense seemed an unwarrantable injustice.”³⁹ Trevaskis went on to describe the situation of the predominantly agriculturally-based Christian Eritreans:

“Progressively they became indebted to their Moslem creditors, losing property to them as mortgages were foreclosed. It was for this reason that the Moslem traders were feared. Being feared and envied they were hated.”⁴⁰

Ironically, the propensity for Eritrean Muslims, mainly the Jiberti, for becoming moneylenders, shop owners, and traders, was due to the fact that traditionally only Christians were entitled to land rights, particularly in the most rural regions. Professions other than tilling the land were regarded by and large as occupations for “outsiders.”⁴¹

When examining the grievances that developed among many Eritrean Christians, it is also important to note the considerable degree of unrest and resistance that began to permeate even the farthest corners of Eritrea’s Muslim communities. By 1945, the BMA was faced with an increasingly volatile resistance of a number of the small Muslim Tigre-speaking tribes of Eritrea’s Northern Highlands. Nearly 90% of the local population had been resigned to a state of serfdom since even before the arrival of the Italians.⁴² As 1945 progressed, Tigre-speaking serfs, originating mainly from the tribe of Ad Taklais, began demanding complete independence from the landowning aristocratic families of the region, known as the *shumagulle*. In addition, the highland serfs also refused to pay any of the customary taxes that had been levied by the BMA through the *shumagulle*.⁴³

³⁹ Ibid., p. 50.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 51.

⁴¹ Jordan Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea: A Critique of Ethiopian Studies* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1989), p. 76.

⁴² Longrigg, *A Short History of Eritrea*, p. 71.

⁴³ Ibid.

By 1946, the demands of the serfs for complete emancipation from the *shumagulle* were compounded by another political dilemma originating among another predominantly Muslim tribal group, the Beni-Amer. Although former Beni-Amer serfs had conducted raids against their landowners, the formally Italian-supported *Nabtab*, serf revolts had begun to spread from the western Eritrean region of Gash-sedit to as far south to the borders of Ethiopia and north to the Sahel and Massawa provinces.⁴⁴ As civil unrest spread during 1946, the BMA began contemplating ways to bring about an effective compromise of the situation between the serfs and the embattled landowning aristocrats. In late 1946, a group of ambitious Muslim merchants and former serfs from the towns of Keren and Agorat allied under the leadership of a former interpreter for the Italian government named Ibrahim Sultan.⁴⁵ Faced with serf uprisings throughout Tigray that threatened to plunge the region into administrative and civil chaos, the BMA agreed to meet with Sultan and his colleagues in an attempt to forge an agreement for permanent serf emancipation. Despite the fact that the process of serf emancipation would not be completed until 1949, the conditions between the BMA and the serf representatives succeeded in creating a system of new chiefs, sub-chiefs, and tribal subdivisions that emerged to take the place of the former system controlled by the *shamagulle*.⁴⁶

While scattered peasant revolts continued until 1949, the movement's inception and the primary objectives that were agreed on between the BMA and Sultan were emblematic of the larger influence of Eritrea's growing orthodox Muslim leadership in serving to initiate social and political change. Poole has argued that the development of

⁴⁴ Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*, p. 77.

⁴⁵ Trevaskis, *Eritrea, a colony in Transition*, p. 72.

⁴⁶ David Poole, *From Guerillas to Government*, p. 44.

the serf emancipation movement was an important feature in what he considers the “expansion of mixed populist and orthodox Islam” during the nineteenth century.⁴⁷ Poole goes on to state that this dual progression was ultimately centered on the importance of law within Islamic peasant society, and that “Islamic revival attracted followers on the basis not only of their reputation for piety and *baraka* but for their introduction of *sharia* legal principles.”⁴⁸

This development appears to have been especially evident when examining the ever-widening conflict between *sharia*, practiced by Eritrea’s Orthodox Muslims, and the “customary law,” the set of legal codes that had traditionally been introduced by one conquering people over another in the region.⁴⁹ Although customary law was not introduced by European colonists, both the Italian settlers and British authorities utilized the system as a means of enacting taxation as well as military conscription, often through the authority of local elites. Additionally, many Eritrean Muslims found that *sharia* was often supplanted when their territories were conquered by Christian Eritreans, who, as non-Muslims, viewed *sharia* as an illegitimate to their own legal system.⁵⁰

Trevaskis cites a notable example in which serfs of the Bayt Asghede tribe in south-western Eritrea rallied around the authority of a local orthodox Muslim leader rather than continue making payments to Christian landowners:

Dissident serfs were attracted to Shaykh El Emin and his family both because they respected him as a form of saint, and because they followed him as subjects and not as serfs. This relationship

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Kennedy Trevaskis, “The Tribes and Peoples of Northern Ethiopia,” in *Trevaskis Papers*, 1944, Eritrea, pp. 33-34.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

has endured and such dues as the ruling family have received are voluntary offerings and not obligatory payments.⁵¹

The expansion of populist Muslim influence had important consequences for how other seemingly less orthodox Islamic leaders approached the issue of nationalism. Local Islamic leaders, impelled largely by fear of being undermined by customary law, began to create alliances with Islamic preachers as well as other serf emancipation leaders. These alliances would have a dramatic effect on future Muslim communities, as twenty-eight new Muslim tribes, created through the establishment of semi-autonomous regional religious hierarchies, were formed between 1946 and 1949.⁵² These changes, which we can broadly categorize as the large-scale development of “neo-tribal formations,” ultimately served as a major source for cultural and political unity among Muslims throughout the region.

Where as past communities under the *shamagulle* had been comprised of both Christian and Muslim residents, the new tribal structures, by virtue of their composition as exclusively Islamic in orientation, allowed for a greater development among each respective tribe to pursue dialog with their community leaders within the context of essentially an Islamic society, thereby circumventing the previous tribal arrangements that had forced many Eritrean Muslims to approach and voice concerns within their communities usually as members of an Islamic minority than as the dominant religious group. This unity was compounded by the fact that a significant number of the “new” tribal leaders were actually educated urbanites of serf origin.⁵³ These new-fangled tribal

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 57.

⁵² Kennedy Trevaskis, “Eritrea: The End of the Italian Empire, Part II,” in *Trevaskis Papers*, Chapter 12, p. 7. It is estimated that a total of 180,000 residents were relocated into these tribal formations.

⁵³ Poole, *From Guerillas to Government*, p. 46

figures, by virtue of their experiences as merchants, businessmen, and civil workers, represented a better informed and modernized assortment of activists that ultimately, as will become apparent, used their own knowledge and experience to help create further momentum for the developing nationalist struggle. Yet even as the BMA worked to achieve a lasting arrangement with Muslim peasants in the Northern Highlands, the administration proved unprepared and unable to subdue the activities of pro-Ethiopian Eritreans that ultimately helped ignite dramatic conflict between Islamic and Christian segments of the Eritrean citizenry.

While formalized political parties were not permitted until 1946, two major political factions had become informally established soon after Italy's defeat. The first group, the Party for the Love of Country (PLC) was established by politically active and mainly Christian Eritreans in 1941 and, influenced by western ideals against the traditions of monarchy and nobility, promoted the establishment of an independent, democratic Eritrea.⁵⁴ In contrast, the second group was comprised of Eritreans who were in the service of the Ethiopian government and favored the region's incorporation with the imperial crown. Meeting with government officials in 1944 in Addis Ababa, the group established the Society for the Unification of Eritrea with Ethiopia (SUEE).⁵⁵

The organization, financed by a combination of support from the Ethiopian government as well as from contributions from the organization's annual membership fees, quickly began to infiltrate the BMA office in Eritrea and recruit Eritreans to join the

⁵⁴ Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*, p. 72

⁵⁵ Lloyd Ellingson, "The Emergence of Political Parties in Eritrea, 1941-1950." *Journal of African History* 18 (1977): p. 269.

cause.⁵⁶ Convinced that the British were conspiring to return control of Eritrea back into Italian hands, members of the SUEE also began garnering support away from the PLC and into the SUEE, which began a prolonged campaign to expose the “enemies” of the Eritrean people, especially Muslims.

Following Ethiopia’s establishment of the Ethiopian Liaison Office in Asmara in early 1946, campaigns against Muslims dramatically increased throughout Eritrea’s major population centers. Violent attacks by Ethiopian-inspired youths against Arab merchants took place in Massawa and Keren in April. On July 28th, the BMA was forced to break up a violent anti-Arab/Muslim demonstration in Asmara that led to a sizeable riot in the city. Arab shops and Arab properties were set ablaze and “half-crazed mobs” marched to the prison where the ringleaders of the initial demonstration had been taken by British authorities.⁵⁷ The increasing hostility and polarization between Eritrean’s Christian and Muslim communities reached a dramatic crescendo in August of 1946. While Christian-Islamic tensions had already been increasing throughout the year, it was armed personnel under the direct control of the BMA that ultimately served as the catalyst for the most dramatic and destructive confrontation yet.

After defeating the Italian military the BMA relied largely on the use of Sudanese soldiers in the policing of the Eritrean population. The presence of these soldiers, who, as members of the Sudan Defense Force (SDF) were overwhelmingly Islamic in orientation, was a fact not lost on Eritreans within or sympathetic to the SUEE. Consequently, the actions of a handful of SDF soldiers would have a disastrous effect on

⁵⁶ Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*, p. 82.

⁵⁷ British Military Administration, Sec./182, December 10, 1947 (Henceforth will be noted as BMA).

thousands of Eritrea's Muslims following an incident that took place on August 28th 1946.

After an Asmara boy had snatched a moneybox from a game of chance being played by members of the SDF, five soldiers gave chase and, having caught the child, began to hit him. In retaliation, a vengeful mob attacked the Sudanese soldiers, causing serious injury to three of them. Hours after fleeing, the soldiers returned to Asmara from their barracks at Fort Baldissera, accompanied by 70 of their heavily armed comrades, and began opening fire in the Christian section of the city. According to the official BMA estimate, 40 Coptic Christians were killed while 64 were wounded, while only two Muslims were reported to have been killed.⁵⁸ However, the BMA report omitted the curious fact that 3 SDF soldiers had been killed and 13 others were wounded in the skirmish. Jordan Gebre-Medhin has theorized that given the unlikelihood that these casualties were not caused by friendly fire and because there are no reports of any soldiers being killed by BMA peacekeepers, it would appear that those casualties were incurred by "hired guns of the Ethiopian state."⁵⁹

This assertion appears to be validated by the testimony of H.L. Farquhar, who, in a letter sent to Ernest Bevin nearly three weeks after the incident, remarked:

There is a tendency amongst certain xenophobe and "Greater Ethiopia" elements in this country to interfere unduly in Eritrean affairs, and there is, I think, little doubt that they have the tacit support of the Ethiopian government, who are not averse to seeing the present British regime in this territory discredited. They will doubtless do their best to make political capital out of the incident.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ BMA, Report (5/56/989), December 9, 1947.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ F.O. 3885/190/66, Farquhar to Bevin.

This is an important point in examining Muslim-Christian relations during this period because it shows that even the BMA suspected that the Ethiopian state had been assuming an active role in the religious conflicts between Christians and Muslims in Eritrea. While the incident of August 28th can and should be viewed as a dramatic injustice against a largely Christian section of the population of Asmara, the event also helped influence a dramatic change among many in Eritrea's Islamic community who began to see the need for a realistic and effective political body to help ensure both protection as well as a voice in future matters.

2.2 The Moslem League

Utilizing the grassroots support of merchants, traders, and craftsmen, concerned Muslim leaders convened a meeting on December 4th 1946 in the city of Keren.⁶¹ The meeting culminated with the participants agreeing to the formation of a new political organization, the Moslem League.⁶² Ibrahim Sultan, the figure who had risen to prominence years earlier for his efforts in solving the serf rebellion, was elected Secretary General of the organization while Seyid Bubakr bin Othman, a community leader who had been the head of the Eritrean branch of the Sufi order Tariqa Khatmia, was elected president.⁶³

The Moslem League primarily drew its support from the heavily Islamic areas of the Western Province and the Massawa and Red Sea districts as well as a small following of Coptic Christians from the “predominately Christian highlands.”⁶⁴ The Moslem

⁶¹ Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, p. 74.

⁶² The archaic spelling of *Moslem* will be used hereafter when referring directly to the organization itself.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ellingson, “The Emergence of Political Parties in Eritrea,” p. 262.

League was created with the full intention of its members to reject an Eritrean union with Ethiopia. Clearly the recent trends within Eritrean society had demonstrated to the league that the Ethiopian state, dominated by the Christian Amhara highlanders, had little concern for the grievances of Muslims in Eritrea who were largely considered outsiders. Compounding the concerns of the Muslim activists was the reality that the SUEE, in addition to recruiting pro-Ethiopian extremists and carrying out acts of violence against Muslims, was, by 1946, organized into a larger, more well-established political organization, the Unionist Party.⁶⁵ It did not help to alleviate Muslim fears that the Unionist party was largely supported by local notability and the Ethiopian Orthodox clergy, two of the more hostile groups that had long seen suspicious and hostile towards Islam.⁶⁶

The collective fear of being incorporated into Ethiopia may certainly have been one of the main reasons why the Moslem League was able to garner support from different segments of Eritrea's Muslim population.⁶⁷ However, the development of the Moslem League and subsequent organizations sympathetic to an Islamic-centered cause can also be viewed as a result of the largely dismal economic circumstances experienced by the majority of Eritrean Muslims following the end of World War II. It is clear that each predominantly Muslim ethnic group had their own reasons for pursuing other political avenues than merely relying on the BMA, who in their eyes was merely

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Roy Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1990), p. 68.

⁶⁷ For a deeper analysis Muslim fears of Eritrea's partitioning to Ethiopia, see John Markakis "The Nationalist Revolution in Eritrea," in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 26, March, 1988, pp. 51-70.

presiding over an increasingly desperate situation. As Trevaskis commented, by the end of 1946:

the Jiberti and townsfolk of Massawa, who at this time were suffering from acute unemployment, looked back with frank regret to the golden days of the Italian regime. The Saho grumbled that the British had done nothing to restrain Abyssinian aggression, and the Kunama complained that they had never suffered such damage and injury as during the British Occupation.⁶⁸

This brief passage serves to illustrate the correlation between economic stagnation and political activism among Eritrea's urban Muslims. As early as 1945, the "war boom" that had sustained Eritrea's industrial economy and urban population had come to an end. Wartime markets disappeared, while Italian repatriation and concerns about Eritrea's political future led to a withdrawal of capital investment and business relocations away from Eritrea.⁶⁹ By 1947 the situation had become worse as poor seasonal harvests raised the price of *teff*, the staple grain of most Eritreans, by more than 30 percent.⁷⁰ The growing frustrations of Muslims towards the BMA for their ineptness in curtailing the economic situation, coupled with their frustrations at the administration's ineptness at limiting the activities of the Ethiopian-backed Unionists appears to have been a widespread phenomenon, as Trevaskis observed that by 1947 the majority favored independence and rejected any notion of having Eritrea partitioned to either Sudan or Ethiopia.

2.3 Growth of Eritrean Media

Ironically, the BMA can be given credit for presiding over what proved to be the largest expansion of Eritrean media up to that point in time. The point could also be

⁶⁸ Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, p. 74.

⁶⁹ Tom Killion, "Eritrean Workers' Organization and Early Nationalist Mobilization: 1948-1958," *Eritrean Studies Review* 2 (1997): p. 6.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7

made that this development ultimately helped to bring together larger numbers of politically-minded Eritreans, as many of the administration's civil policies with regard to media and communications served as vehicles for generating greater social and political cohesion. As early as 1942 the BMA had issued the first Eritrean publication in an indigenous language, the Tigrinya-printed *Semunawi Gazetta Eritrea* (Eritrean Weekly News).⁷¹ It was not long after this publication that the BMA, following a series of requests by Muslim merchants, agreed to publish an Arabic language newspaper, the *Arabic Weekly News*, which sold approximately 2,000 copies during its initial printing.⁷² It was this particular publication that represented the first truly modern media outlet that recognized and catered to Eritrean Muslims. In a 1944 BMA publication entitled *The First to be Freed*, British authorities proclaimed, "the population of Eritrea, both Italian and native, is experiencing for the first time in many years the lesson of objectivity in the presentation of news."⁷³

Citing that their administration's Health Department was determined that Eritreans, "both Moslem and Christian, shall not forget their mother tongue in learning Italian-or English," BMA authorities also made a point of engaging in the distribution of a series of Tigrinya-language texts aimed at bringing awareness to issues of public health. Utilizing pamphlets that were constructed by officials within the BMA's Medical Department headquarters in Asmara, materials which focused on personal hygiene,

⁷¹ With the development of the paper, the BMA asserted that Eritreans were now being provided with objective news and, "for the first time in history, with a newspaper in their own language." See British Military Administration, *The First to be Freed* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office), 1944. p. 35

⁷² Deborah Johnson, "Media History of Eritrea." *Eritrean Studies Review* 1 (1996): p. 147.

⁷³ BMA, *The First to be Freed*, p. 37.

disease prevention, and injury treatment became available to the city population by early 1943.

Additionally, the BMA was responsible for printing and distributing a series of pamphlets through out Asmara that encouraged Eritrean parents to take a greater interest in the academic performance of their children, culminating in the dissemination of student progress reports that were made available to parents by 1942.⁷⁴ It was through this diffusion of British-backed media that many Eritreans first became accustomed to having access, however limited, to information that pertained to their own community affairs and their everyday lives as Eritreans. While it was a policy that intentionally limited the degree of actual involvement in public affairs, the BMA's role in the post-war media expansion had a far greater influence on the development of national consciousness within Eritrea than could have originally been foreseen.

By 1947, the BMA, which had previously kept a close watch on the dissemination of Eritrean media, finally relaxed its policy of censorship and allowed for the printing of several politically conscious publications. While some of the publications, including the Unionist-backed *Ethiopia* and the Italian-supported *Netza Eritrea* both attempted to get support from Muslim communities by featuring text in Arabic script, the principal journal that attracted by greatest following among Eritrean Muslims was *Sout Arrabita Al Islamia Al Eritrea*. Published by the Moslem League, the publication had a circulation of nearly 2,000 and represented the main media organ of the organization.⁷⁵ The

⁷⁴ Not long after this development, BMA authorities helped sponsor "Speech Days" in which parents as well as government officials would attend school engagements that recognized students academic achievements. See *The First to be Freed*, p. 34.

⁷⁵ Johnson, "Media History of Eritrea," p. 147.

development of a limited but active political press by 1947 represented a major development in the continuing progression of political activism among Eritrean Muslims. For the first time, Muslim leaders were able to communicate political developments within the major cities as well as their own concerns to their respective communities.

The records indicate that as representatives of the British government, the majority of personnel within the BMA in Eritrea did believe, unlike the previous Italian administrators, that Eritreans should be at least given some degree of political freedom and education in the post war environment. Equally important to acknowledge however, is the fact that this surge in political dissemination was also the result of a covert attempt by the British to gauge the degree to which Eritreans themselves felt about the cause for independence, partition, or union with Ethiopia. Before 1944 it had been assumed by those in the BMA that most Eritreans were not concerned enough to object to a partitioning of the region. However this changed dramatically after an anonymous letter appeared in the August 3rd issue of *Semunawi Gazetta Eritrea* which advised that partition would be the best option because of the that fact that there was not any cohesive unity between the predominantly Christian highlanders and Muslim lowlanders.⁷⁶ While its has been alleged that Stephen Longrigg was in fact the author of the piece, of greater importance remains the fact that the letter triggered a “flooding” of written responses to the newspaper among both Muslims and Christians who objected to the proposition put forth by the “anonymous” author.⁷⁷ Arguing that “elements of unity” had existed among both groups for decades, many of the more impassioned Eritrean critics commented also

⁷⁶ Alemseged Tesfai, *Aynfelale: 1941-1950*. Asmara: Hidri Publishers, 2002. p. 119.

⁷⁷ Alemseged Tesfai. Interviewed by Joseph Venosa, December 2006.

that the bonds which held their land together were almost impossible for foreigners to fully understand.⁷⁸ Ultimately, the public outrage over the very idea of partition crossed the entire political spectrum, as unionists were outraged at the thought that Eritrea would not be joined with Ethiopia and the predominantly Muslim nationalists were only further enraged at the thought of being denied complete independence while under British administration.

The events of August 1944 help reinforce the idea that the relaxing of the Eritrean press should be viewed more as a strategic move on the part of British authorities rather than as an innocuous gesture of promoting free speech. The carefully planned strategy on the part of the BMA in planting such divisive editorials may have been part of a larger plan to offset the early domination the Unionist faction represented during this period. There is strong evidence to suggest that Britain's allowance of a free press was actually an indirect way of helping to empower the Moslem League in an attempt to offset the ongoing activities of the SUEE, now widely known as the Unionist Party. Trevaskis commented on the situation, stating,

“Among some British there was undoubted resentment at the challenge to their authority (British power) implicit in Ethiopian pretensions and many British officers found it difficult to conceal their dislike of the bitter and touchy young men in the Mahber Fikri Hager [Unionist Party].⁷⁹

In fact, some scholars, including Teskete Negash, have gone so far as to assert that the Moslem League was essentially a creation of the BMA, who “twisted the arms of Muslim leaders” into forming the Moslem League.⁸⁰ While it can be said that British authorities were not at all disappointed in the rise of the League, Negash's theory is compromised by

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, p. 61.

⁸⁰ Tekeste Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997), p. 31.

the administration's relative ambivalence concerning the very nature of Eritrea's political future, as a variety of British officials expressed wavering viewpoints on the subject.

For example, Robert Howe, one of the British officials and soon-to-be Governor-General of the Sudan commented "there is no doubt that a large part of the Eritrean plateau should, on racial, religious, and economic grounds, be part of Ethiopia."⁸¹

Others, including Ivor Thomas, another official serving in the Colonial Office in Asmara, testified that the "greater part" of Eritrea be returned to Italy based on the fact that "it was very well administered, and so far as I know...the Italians are not unpopular there."⁸²

Despite such contrasting perspectives, there is scant information that suggests that even a significant minority of those in the BMA supported complete Eritrean independence.

Considering the fact that the creation of an unpartitioned, independent Eritrea had been the cornerstone of the Moslem League, this suggests that the British relationship with the Moslem League was not as considerable as Negash has indicated. Negash's assertion is also hindered by the fact that the BMA presided over a dramatic fracturing of the Moslem League as 1947 progressed, as two splinter groups, dissatisfied with the policy of the organization broke away from the league to form the National Muslim Party of Massawa (NMPM) and the predominantly Muslim group, the New Eritrean Pro-Italy Party.

2.4 Additional Political Parties

The creation of the latter group demonstrates the wide-range of interests affecting different Muslim groups even during such a period of heightened tensions between Eritreans of different faiths. The party, composed largely of former civil servants and

⁸¹ William Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East 1945-1951* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 291.

⁸² Ibid.

workers from the former Italian regime, felt that Eritrea's best chance for independence first required a period of intermediate Italian occupation that could help facilitate the process. Through the financial support of Eritrea's Italian settler community, the New Eritrean Pro-Italy Party strived to expand its message of wanting to regain the economic and educational opportunities that many Muslim residents had experienced under Italian rule.⁸³

In contrast, the NMPM, under the leadership of its Secretary-General, Osman Adam Bey, supported the idea that Eritrea was not ready to receive independence and proposed that Eritrea be placed under British trusteeship for a period of ten years. Bey went so far as to proclaim that the BMA had been "very much interested in the welfare and progress of the people of the country."⁸⁴ Bey's assertion reveals that at the very least, a significant number of Eritrean Muslims, were not discontented with the British presence in Eritrea. While a number of members from the larger Moslem League voiced their concerns and anger towards the British, the NMPM, which claimed a membership of 56, 377 individuals, represented a more receptive group of Massawa-based merchants and activists that viewed several British initiatives, including the establishment of native courts, the building of local schools, and the improvement of regional health conditions as clear indications of the positive prospects of British administration.⁸⁵

The political fracturing that began to reveal itself within the Moslem League, however marginal, illustrates that there was not, by any means, a coherent, uniform Islamic viewpoint on Eritrea's political future. The presence of the BMA, in spite of the

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 273.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

ensuing economic hardship and increased religious tension that many Muslims experienced, did provide a feasible alternative to some who literally feared for their own safety in the event Eritrea be dominated by Ethiopia.⁸⁶ As such, it can be deduced that different Islamic communities expressed varying support for each respective political party. For the Jiberti who bore the brunt of prejudice and discrimination from the overwhelming Christian pro-Unionists, especially within Asmara, the Moslem League provided a much needed outlet to address not only political issues but fundamental aspects such as personal safety as well as the effect of anti-Muslim activity on their businesses and trades.

The same could be said for the majority of Tigre-speaking peoples of the highlands, whose tribal organization was in-large-part owed to the network of Muslim activists that would eventually form the core of the Moslem League. Likewise, other Muslim groups such as the Afar on the desert coastal lowlands of the *Dankalia* region experienced considerably less civil and economic strife by virtue of their location near the BMA facilities in Massawa, whose presence ultimately spared their communities from the same economic and social upheaval that other groups in cities such as Asmara and Keren experienced.⁸⁷ Whatever the political differences between these different peoples, all factions agreed on essentially two points, one, that no part of Eritrea should be partitioned with Ethiopia and two, that at some point in the foreseeable future, Eritrea was to be granted complete independence.

⁸⁶ Markakis, "The Nationalist Revolution in Eritrea," p. 52.

⁸⁷ Ellingson, "The Rise of Political Parties in Eritrea," p. 273.

2.5 The Four Power Commission

Although claiming to be neutral regarding Eritrea's political future, Great Britain's policy largely reflected the aforementioned testimony of BMA officials such as Newbold and Howe.⁸⁸ However, by 1948 with the development of the Independence Bloc, a consortium of allied political parties that included predominantly Islamic-oriented parties such as the Moslem League and the New Eritrean Pro-Italy Party as well as more Christian-dominated groups, including Woldeab Woldemariam's Liberal Progressive Party, the British government was, at least officially, willing to leave the decision to findings of the Four Power Commission.⁸⁹ Consisting of delegates from France, the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, this "Commission of Investigation" was charged with the task of establishing a clear understanding of the general population's views regarding their region's political future. Faced with an extremely difficult task, the Commission was aided by a plan implemented by the BMA in which representatives from all major clans, tribal groups, and families were to meet with the members of the Commission.⁹⁰ Eventually, a total of 3,336 representatives were interviewed by the Four Power Commission, the results of which revealed that approximately forty eight percent of those interviewed declared their support for a union with Ethiopia as compared with forty three percent who declared support for one of the

⁸⁸ This was a view held similarly by the majority of global powers with invested interests in the region, including the United States and France, although the Italian government continued to object to any attempt at dividing Eritrean territory.

⁸⁹ Mesfin Araya, "The Eritrean Question: An Alternative Explanation." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 28 (March 1990), p. 86.

⁹⁰ Richard Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980), p. 21.

parties within the Independence Bloc and nine percent that supported either a return to either Italian rule or to a period of Italian trusteeship.⁹¹

The findings of the commission demonstrate, according to Peter With, that it was the BMA who invariably tainted the overall investigation. With has claimed in his work *Politics and Liberation* that the British policy, rather than being one of diplomatic neutrality, was being increasingly influenced by the presence of Frank E. Stafford, a British official who had once served as a financial officer to Imperial Ethiopian Government.⁹² As early as 1946 Stafford had communicated to the Foreign Office in Asmara that complete Eritrean independence was out of the question. According to the official's reasoning, a trusteeship would "provide an attractive alternative to outright absorption into Ethiopia, whose present regime and status of development leave no room for misgivings, particularly if the right to transfer to Ethiopia remains open during a period of trusteeship."⁹³

Both With and Eritrean historian Roy Pateman have asserted that there was considerable "intimidation" of many of the representatives that did report to the commission and that an even greater number of Eritreans, particularly those who were supporters of the Muslim League and the Liberal Progressive Party, were prevented from even appearing before the commission.⁹⁴ Although these claims place the majority of the blame on Unionist elements that were being supported by the Ethiopian state, Ellingson's additional investigation has given credence to the idea that the BMA was also

⁹¹ Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning*, p. 69.

⁹² Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*, p. 22.

⁹³ FO 371/63175. F.E. Stafford to FO, Asmara, 2/12/46.

⁹⁴ Peter With, *Politics and Liberation: the Eritrean Struggle, 1961-1986* (Aarhus: University of Aarhus, 1987), p. 145.

complaisant in allowing the commission's findings to be compromised with regard to Muslim and other pro-Independence segments of the population.⁹⁵ Even the commission's findings, the *Results of Hearings of Representatives of Settled Communities and Tribal Representatives* gives mention to groups of Muslims within the Serae administrative division who expressed a "fear of intimidation" at the hands of local Unionists during the course of the investigation.⁹⁶

This admission buttresses not only the claims of With and Pateman but also the testimony of the Moslem League itself, whose official 1950 statement concerning the political and social conditions of Eritrean Muslims took note of the lingering inability of the "present (British) Administration" in curtailing acts of intimidation and harassment against those willing to speak out for the cause of independence.⁹⁷ The very fact that such accusations were documented during a period of assessment by an international commission makes charges of British administrative incompetence all the more valid. Yet if we are to believe that the BMA's presence was as ineffectual as it was detrimental to the conditions of most politically conscious Muslims, the issue of British motivations in Eritrea invariably comes into question.

One of the more ardent criticisms of the BMA's presence in Eritrea during this period is found in Bocresion Haile's *The Collusion on Eritrea*. Haile's argument centers on the British government's ulterior motives in governing over the former Italian colony.

⁹⁵ According to Ellingson, many of the delegates who were sent before the commission were not sure themselves if they were representing their ethnic, religious, or geographical communities. Others, specifically those favoring the unionist cause, provided testimony that the Four Power Commission believed was carefully memorized and scripted. See *Four Power Commission Report*, Appendices, 159-173.

⁹⁶ Habtu Ghebre-Ab, *Ethiopia and Eritrea: A Documentary Study* (Trenton: The Red Sea Press, 1993), p. 75.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

Haile stresses that Great Britain, as early as 1942, had intended on eventually allowing Ethiopia dominion over Eritrea in exchange for Emperor Haile Selassie's assurance that Ethiopia would allow British forces to annex the Ogaden region in hopes of strengthening Britain's colony in Northern Somalia. Furthermore, according to Haile, the British government had "committed itself" to Ethiopia when state officials claimed that they viewed "with sympathy Ethiopian [sic] aspirations in regard to Eritrea and access to the Sea."⁹⁸ This commitment was later renewed at the 1945 meeting in Cairo when British Prime Minister Clement Atlee first met with Haile Selassie.⁹⁹

2.6 Conclusions:

Given the fact that an overwhelming majority of British officials that supported the idea of partitioning Eritrea agreed that western Eritrea should be given to Sudan while the lowland coastal area, including the ports of Massawa and Assab be partitioned to Ethiopia, it suffices to say that such aspirations would not have compromised the government's diplomatic promises to Ethiopia. Therefore, the aforementioned testimony of Douglass Newbold most likely captures the true spirit of the "ulterior motives" as mentioned by Haile.¹⁰⁰ If these assumptions are to be taken at face value, than it seems logical to deduct that the Four Power Commission's inquiry was less about retrieving a transparent assessment of the Muslim-dominated independence movement within the region and more about collecting the testimony of Christian Unionists that could

⁹⁸ Bocresion Haile, *The Collusion on Eritrea* (Asmara: 2000), p. 74.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ The western portion of Eritrea that was proposed to be partitioned to Sudan included the administrative provinces of Gash-Setit, Barka, Sahel, and Senheit. See Poole, *From Guerillas to Government*, xvii.

ultimately provide both Ethiopia and Great Britain with the excuse needed to justify the Eritrean partition.

However, because of the lack of a clear majority either in favor or against independence, and because there was no diplomatic basis on which all Four Power could agree, the Commission's final report, issued in May of 1948, ultimately deferred the issue to the Third session of the United Nations General Assembly, ushering in a new era in the history of Eritrean nationalism and in the lives of many of the more prominent Muslim leaders who spearheaded the movement.¹⁰¹ While the British Military Administration remained the overseeing authority in Eritrea until the region was federated with the Ethiopian state in 1952, the British presence did not have as considerable an effect on indigenous political activism as it did between 1941 and 1948.

Saul Kelly has attributed this development mainly to the substantial weakening of the Independence Bloc in 1949, as the Muslim League, the coalition's largest group, severed ties in opposition to what they perceived as the Bloc's increasingly close financial and political relationship with members of Eritrea's influential Italian settler population.¹⁰² Other investigators such as Haile and to a lesser extent Pateman have indicated that the British role in Eritrean political affairs was more the result of the increased focus of the United Nations, who, by September of 1949, had officially begun to address the "question of Eritrea."¹⁰³ While it is exceedingly difficult to argue with Haile's claim that British authorities viewed Eritrea's future in light of their own

¹⁰¹ Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning*, p. 70.

¹⁰² Saul Kelly, *Cold War in the Desert: Britain, the United States and the Italian Colonies, 1945-52* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), p. 154.

¹⁰³ Haile, *The Collusion on Eritrea*, p. 76.

interests, Britain's presence did have a significant role in the development of political and in some cases cultural identity of Eritrea's Muslim population.¹⁰⁴

It was under British authority and direction that thousands of Tigre-speaking Muslims were able to gain their independence from the long-standing system of serfdom and the ruling authority of the *shamgulle*. This development also allowed for a greater incorporation of *Sharia* into peasant life rather than the customary law that the majority of rural Muslims had been forced to adhere to while under the *Shamgulle* and their European overseers. These initial reforms, which were later complemented by other initiatives such as the promotion of a more active and uninhibited print media, encouraged, in the words of Ellingson an "atmosphere in which all people of Eritrea might have the maximum voice in determining their political future."¹⁰⁵

While the British presence in Eritrea amplified the atmosphere of mistrust between Muslim and Christian segments of the population which lead to countless acts of political violence and discrimination against Muslim merchants and businesses, particularly after 1945, it *was* nevertheless the BMA that served as the main proponent for a more informed and politically active Muslim populace. By encouraging individuals such as Ibrahim Sultan, Seyid Bubakr bin Othman, and other community leaders to take greater political action, the British were shoring up an indigenous counter to the blatantly anti-British ideology of the growing Unionist movement. Therefore, while the motivations of British authorities were locked into a position of self-interest, the British

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ellingson, "The Rise of Political Parties in Eritrea," p. 281.

presence did lead to a much more pronounced nationalist sentiment in the region, one that had an increasingly Islamic orientation as the decade progressed.

As political and social rancor intensified between Christian-backed Unionists and Muslim-dominated Nationalists in the wake of the failed Four Power Commission of 1948, the situation ultimately required the nationalist movement, mainly through the leadership of the ever-expanding Moslem League, to mobilize into a more proactive political entity. The following chapters will provide an increased focus on how Muslim nationalists came to spearhead the independence movement without and largely against the consensus of the presiding external powers Britain and the United Nations.

Chapter 3: International Debate and Increased Hostility, 1949-1952

The failure of the Four Power Commission to conclusively agree on the political future of Eritrea ultimately forced the issue to be taken up again by the international community through the execution of the United Nations General Assembly. It is this particular phase of the movement that this chapter will examine with a focus on how the predominately Islamic political organizations adapted to the increasingly hostile conditions both within and outside of Eritrea.

3.1 Deliberating the Future

Meeting in New York on April 6th, 1949, the General Assembly commenced its official Third Session with proceedings on the future of all former Italian colonies.¹⁰⁶ With the issue now before the entire assembly, numerous representatives from across Eritrea's political spectrum were given the opportunity to present their respective claims towards the region's future.

Ibrahim Sultan, the Moslem League's representative to the UN, was the first of the envoys to appear. As Bereket Habte-Selassie has noted, Sultan's argument attempted to place the emphasis on the fact that there was already a decidedly "Islamic character" within Eritrea itself. Sultan contended that approximately 75 percent of all Eritreans were Muslims and that the remaining non-Muslim population, being a heterogeneous mix of predominantly-Christian and animist sects with an equally diverse linguistic mixture, "shared no affinities to the Ethiopian People."¹⁰⁷ In his defense of Eritrean autonomy,

¹⁰⁶ Bereket Habte Selassie, *Eritrea and the United Nations* (Trenton: Red Sea Press), 1989, p. 30.

¹⁰⁷ Okbasghi Yohannes, *Eritrea, a Pawn in World Politics* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press), 1991, p. 13.

Sultan placed special focus on how any incorporation of Eritrea with Ethiopia would prove detrimental to Muslim inhabitants:

Having thus no ethnic, religious, historical, or economic bonds with Ethiopia, the Eritrean Moslems were strongly opposed to the annexation of Eritrea to Ethiopia. Owing to the different political structure of Eritrea and the contribution it might make to the equilibrium of that sector of Africa and the Middle East, the Eritrean Moslems request the United Nations to grant independence to their country. Annexation of the territory to Ethiopia would lead to tragic conflicts. Ethiopia would follow a policy of oppression there and commit acts of violence against the members of the Moslem League as had been proved by the attack as a result of which Sheik Abdel Keber [President of the Moslem League] had recently succumbed as he was preparing himself to come to the General Assembly as a member of the Moslem League.¹⁰⁸

Sultan's presentation was a clear attempt at disarming the long-held claim of Ethiopia that Eritrea had been historically and culturally tied the ancient Ethiopian kingdom.¹⁰⁹

Likewise, Sultan's declaration that Eritrea's political structures were inherently different from Ethiopia and that any interference would have repercussions for both "Africa and the Middle East" illustrates the realization that Eritrea was, in many ways, tied to the larger Middle East and Islamic world more than to the feudal system of the Ethiopian highlands. This was also a view similarly held by other politically active Muslims, many of whom were not associated with the Moslem League, but with the New Eritrea Pro-Italy Party (NEPIP). In his testimony before the UN General Assembly, Pro-Italy Party representative Muhammed Abdullah stressed that more than sixty years of

¹⁰⁸ G.A.O.R., First Committee, Third Session, Part II, 5 April-13 May 1949, p. 92

¹⁰⁹ In 1947, M. Aklilu Habte Wold, the vice-minister for Foreign Affairs in Ethiopia, professed in a speech before the council of Foreign Ministers that "Tigre or Eritrea remained continuously under Ethiopian sovereignty for thousands of years" and that it had only been the brief interlude caused by the Italian colonial presence that had created minimal cultural and political differences between the two peoples. Variations of this claim have also been purported by authors of Ethiopian and Eritrean history in recent years. See Tekeste Negash & Kjetil Tronvoll, *Brothers at War: Making Sense of the Eritrean-Ethiopian War* (Athens: Ohio university Press, 2000); Harold Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

Italian colonial rule had forever altered Eritrean society into an already autonomous political, social, and cultural entity.¹¹⁰

Citing that the Italian language was the only foreign language spoken in Eritrea that could facilitate “intellectual and technical development” and that only Eritrea’s Italian settler community possessed the necessary capital and international contacts necessary for economic progress, Abdullah’s testimony also concurred with Sultan’s insistence that Eritrea did not share the same historical experience as Ethiopia, and therefore was entitled to its territorial and political integrity.¹¹¹ While the New Eritrea Pro-Italy Party sympathized with the Moslem League on the preeminent goal of Eritrean independence, the organization’s constituency and agenda was structured around the belief that an “independent” Eritrea would be politically and economically dominated by the Italian community. As a result, the party did draw a considerable amount of support from many Eritrean Muslim merchants, particularly those in Eritrea’s port cities and industrial centers, whose economic base depended upon the financial investment of the European émigrés. In fact, many former members of the National Moslem League of Massawa (NMLM), a breakaway sect of the Moslem League, later joined the NEPIP as the decade progressed.¹¹² Upon further examination, the testimony given by Sultan and Abdullah before the UN delegates can also be seen as acts of deliberate necessity, as the Assembly’s initial deliberation occurred during a period increased tension and political upheaval in Eritrea.

¹¹⁰ Yohannes, *Eritrea, a Pawn in World Politics*, p. 114.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants & Nationalism in Eritrea*, p. 97.

The most serious challenges faced by the nationalists of both the Moslem League as well as other pro-independence organizations during this period was the continued attempts of the British government to subvert Eritrean nationalism through official diplomatic tactics and through the presence of a consistently inept administrative policy. The UN deliberations in the spring of 1949 coincided with the development of a “gentlemen’s agreement” between British Foreign Service Secretary Ernest Bevin and the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Count Sforza. This agreement, eventually known as the *Bevin-Sforza Plan*, included the long-discussed plan to divide Eritrea between Sudan and Ethiopia, again granting Eritrea’s ports to the Ethiopian state.¹¹³

While the Bevin-Sforza plan was eventually rejected by the assembly in May of 1949, its very existence only served to increase the distrust of Eritrean Muslims towards the BMA as the year progressed. Relations were not improved as a number of Eritrean nationalists, both Muslims as well as Italian-settlers, were murdered, creating further resentment towards the BMA’s perceived “inertia” and negligence in thwarting political violence.¹¹⁴ Even the NEPIP, under the direction of Abdullah, found common ground with the Moslem League by categorically rejecting the stipulations of the Bevin-Sforza Plan and criticizing what were believed to be Britain’s ulterior motives in retaining its administrative presence in Eritrea.¹¹⁵ Ironically, this mutual discontent helped bridge the gap between the nationalists of the Moslem League and the settler-backed Muslims of the NEPIP, culminating in the formation of the Independence Bloc in June of 1949.

¹¹³ Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Dominance, resistance, nationalism, 1941-1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1995, p. 74.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

As a consortium of Pro-Independence parties, the Independence Bloc was created on the heels of the defeated Bevin-Sforza Plan and demonstrated an important feature among many Muslim nationalists; their ability to unite across political divisions in the pursuit of increased support for independence. Among the many factions that Moslem League aligned themselves with were historically “non-Muslim” groups such as the Italo-Eritrean Organization and Veterans’ Association as well as the more Christian-oriented Liberal Progressive Party and the secular minded Intellectual Association.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, Ibrahim Sultan’s ascension as the main spokesmen for this umbrella organization demonstrates that in spite of the Bloc’s status as an association of multiple political parties, it was largely the Moslem League that provided the primary leadership and organizational apparatus in steering the Bloc’s political agenda as the year progressed.

It can also be said that Sultan and his associates in the League were instrumental in rallying enough support within the Bloc to provide a formidable challenge to both the Ethiopian-backed elements of the Unionist Party as well as the less than sympathetic officials within the BMA. While the deliberations at the UN persisted, Sultan’s leadership within the Bloc initially served to galvanize support not only among the different factions of Eritrean Muslims, but also from Italian-supported Christian Eritreans as well as from the Italian settlers themselves. For example, British political advisor Robert C. Mason, while stationed in Asmara in mid-1949, sent a telegram to London stating that all of the nationalist parties:

¹¹⁶ Ellingson, “The Emergence of Political Parties in Eritrea, 1941-1950,” p. 276. The Intellectual Association has been described by Ellingson an organization of Eritrean intellectuals who were decidedly pro-Independence.

have joined up on the Independence platform, I think that there can be no doubt that they represent a clear majority of the country. Two thirds seems to me a reasonable guess, but sixty percent would perhaps be safer...On the whole, therefore, it is the view of most people here with long experience of the country that the idea of Independence has aroused more enthusiasm than the idea of Union did. I agree with this view.¹¹⁷

By the summer of 1949, the United States government had become aware of the rapidly increasing influence of the Bloc. An August memo from the U.S. embassy in Ethiopia, noted that British administrators had estimated that the Independence Bloc commanded “75 per cent of Eritrea.”¹¹⁸

Interestingly enough, this same state department memo also mentioned that defections from the Unionist Party were causing “concerns in the Ethiopian government.” According to the memo, British Brigadier F.G. Drew had inferred that several Ethiopian ministers had made secret excursions into Eritrea in recent months and engaged in “active propaganda” in hopes of rallying support for the unionist cause.¹¹⁹ Drew’s affirmation that officials of the Ethiopian state were directly responsible in countering the rise of the Block demonstrates two important developments. First, it reveals that the main organizers and leaders of the Independence Bloc had, by the BMA’s own admission, transcended cultural and religious boundaries to garner a clear majority of the Eritrean population. Second, it illustrates that the initial claims of those within the Moslem League (and later the Independence Bloc) were correct in their assertion that the Unionist Party was being administered and supported by external elements in Ethiopia, working as agents of the Imperial government rather than as an organization with any credible “mass

¹¹⁷ FO 371/69345, *Mason to Clutton*, 4/29/49.

¹¹⁸ Classified Letter from Merrill, US Embassy, Addis Ababa to Department of State, received August 22, 1949, No. 171, 8/19/49.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

basis and representation.”¹²⁰ The BMA’s own apprehensions at the possibility of a prolonged Independence-minded political alliance within Eritrea demonstrates that by mid-1949, Eritrean nationalism, which the BMA had previously nurtured for their own political agenda primarily among the Eritrean Muslims of the lowlands, had evolved into a political movement that was perceived as a looming diplomatic crisis for British interests in the horn of Africa.

While there were both ideological and political conflicts that had permeated within the Bloc, the summer of 1949 saw many Muslim nationalists and their respective communities faced with the additional burden of having to face the incursions of Ethiopian-backed *shifita* bandits, whose tactics of fear, intimidation, and literal terrorism ultimately sought to coerce both Muslims as well as Italian settlers into supporting union with Ethiopia.¹²¹ Both rural and urban terrorist activities, including political assassinations, bombings, and looting, had “systematically instilled fear in some Eritreans” by the years end.¹²² Ironically, the increase in activities of the *shifita* provided a temporary rallying point for most Muslim-dominated nationalist groups. An August memo from the United States consul in Asmara commented that there was

Almost complete unification of the Moslem population of Eritrea under the banner of Ibrahim Sultan. If one adds to this the defection of the Unionists who never at any time represented a majority of the population, it is clear that Matienzo’s estimate that two thirds of the people opposed to the “annexationing” link of the Ethiopian government, is not too irresponsible...¹²³

¹²⁰ Proceedings of the Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal of the International League for the Rights and Liberation of Peoples, *The Eritrean Case* (Milan: Research and Information Centre on Eritrea), 1984, p. 127.

¹²¹ *Shifita* was a widely used term in Eritrea well before the 1940s, usually denoting a person’s status as an outlaw.

¹²² Gebre-Jordan, *Peasants & Nationalism in Eritrea*, p. 127

¹²³ Merrill to Secretary of State, Control 10772, August 26, 1949.

Likewise, the increase of shifta activity had become a public relations fiasco for the BMA. By 1950 it was estimated that approximately 368 deaths had been caused by the shifta in Eritrea, which, according to Chief administrator D.C. Cumming, was a far greater number than even the number of deaths that had been caused during the “Zionist Outbreak” of 1946 in British Occupied Palestine.¹²⁴

3.2 Decline of the Independence Bloc

While the correspondence of BMA and US officials underscores the broad support that the Independence Bloc initially enjoyed throughout the region, it was members of the Moslem League who were ultimately responsible for the Bloc’s disintegration towards the end of 1949. When the UN General Assembly commenced its Fourth Session in September of 1949, Sultan’s leadership and the strength of the Independence Bloc seemed as secure as ever. Even the U.S. State Department anticipated continued resilience from the Bloc and had warned of Sultan’s continuing influence in drawing increased support among the delegates.¹²⁵ The next five months saw the Independence Bloc, and with it, the seemingly indefatigable unity of Muslim nationalists collapse amid a series of political crises. The earliest signs of the impending fragmentation occurred in September when Sultan came under heavy criticism for allying with the New Eritrean Association (NEA), an organization financed by Italo-Eritrean settlers that had strong ties to the government in Rome.

Sultan’s relationship with the Italian settler community had become increasingly suspect by reactionary forces within the Moslem League, who viewed Sultan’s courting

¹²⁴ F.O. 1015/740, 80779, Cumming to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, March 27, 1951.

¹²⁵ Yohannes, *Eritrea, a Pawn in World Politics*, p. 133.

of Italo-Eritreans as an act of betrayal. Matters were not improved when Sultan, arguing against similar criticisms from Ethiopia, promised to grant the Ethiopian government transit rights and customs concessions should Eritrea achieve independence.¹²⁶ The initial critics of Sultan were led by the “unofficial” spiritual leader of the Tigray tribes, Sheikh Ali Musa Radai.¹²⁷ Radai’s criticism of Sultan and the deep-seated distrust of the Italo-Eritrean settlers prompted this breakaway faction, which quickly established itself as Independent Moslem League (IML), to engage in talks with Ethiopian representatives. After receiving guarantees that the Ethiopian government would respect Muslim religious institutions and that Arabic would be taught in schools alongside Amharic, the IML agreed to support an Eritrean-Ethiopian union rather than see Eritrea achieve independence as a settler-dominated state.¹²⁸

The defection of a substantial number of Eritrean Muslims from both the Independence Bloc and the Moslem League itself had an immediate effect on the coalition’s other affiliates. Three other parties, the Liberal Unionist Party (LUP), the Independent Eritrea United with Ethiopia Party (IEUP), and the Moslem League of the Western Province (MLWP) all severed ties to the Bloc by the end of 1949. Both the LUP and the IEUP soon joined the Unionist cause. While the MLWP did not join the unionist cause, the organization was clear in its assertion that the platform of the Moslem League had become unacceptable. Unlike the Moslem League, the MLWP did not wish to

¹²⁶ Ellingson, “The Emergence of Political Parties, 1941-1950,” p. 277.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

include Italo-Eritreans in the political process and it did not seek immediate independence but rather a ten-year period of trusteeship under British administration.¹²⁹

Some historical works, particularly Okbazgi Yohannes' 1991 text, *Eritrea: A Pawn in World Politics*, have asserted that the fracturing of the Independence Bloc owed more to the actions of subversive elements within the BMA, particularly the exploits of Frank E. Stafford, who allegedly used his influence to encourage political bickering by suggesting to Islamic leaders from the Western Province that Ibrahim Sultan was actually an Italian agent.¹³⁰ This theory is problematic for several reasons. While Stafford's role as an ally of the Ethiopian crown is sufficiently documented, Yohannes' assertion overlooks the fact that even breakaway groups such as the MLWP had issues against Sultan that went beyond his ties with the Italo-Eritrean community, which were made by and large for their political expediency.¹³¹ In addition, this allegation overlooks the very real differences in both policy and practice of different Muslim communities within Eritrea. By implying that Muslim groups like the MLWP and the Massawa-based IML were compelled by Stafford and the BMA to leave the Bloc, the author infers that their respective concerns for their own regions and communities were developed extrinsically by the schemes of British officials. Instead, the growing apprehensions of groups such as the IML and the MLWP and fractioning of the Bloc should be viewed as vindictive of the

¹²⁹ Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, p. 78.

¹³⁰ Yohannes, *Eritrea, a Pawn in World Politics*, p. 141.

¹³¹ While Yohannes states that Stafford was able to "woo" Muslim Aristocrats in Western Eritrea into fully supporting the "British plan for partition," including having the western province incorporated into Sudan, his testimony is discredited by the *Memorandum Submitted by the delegations of Pakistan and Guatemala*, which stated that even those Muslim nationalists, who eventually made up the core of the MLWP "expressed their opposition to the annexation of the Western Province to the Sudan."

continuing development of a new breed of Eritrean Muslim nationalism that fused traditional Muslim identity with a provincial political character.

This development is closely related to what Gellner terms the “reformed Islam” within nationalist movements.¹³² Arguing that the post-modern era has demonstrated a dramatic polarization between the *High Islam* of the educated leadership and the *Low Islam* of the traditional citizenry, particularly the rural peasantry, reformed Islam, as an assertion of regionally-minded interests, demonstrated the agency on the part of contemporary Eritrean Muslims in circumventing traditional leaders such as Sultan in attempting to have greater authority over the interests and needs of their respective communities.¹³³ As a result, the founding and promotion of groups such as the IML and the MLWP demonstrate that even while faced with the external threats of Ethiopian, British, and Italian domination, many Eritrean Muslims also recognized the inherent need for greater pluralism within their own political structures.

3.3 Political Activity and the UN Commission of Inquiry

As the fracturing of the Independence Bloc persisted, representatives of the UN General Assembly were still unable to conclusively agree upon the fate of Eritrea. Basing its decision on the stipulations of Resolution 289A, the General Assembly established a UN Commission of Inquiry to once again travel to the region and assess the political climate.¹³⁴ In creating the commission, representatives from five nations, Norway, Pakistan, Guatemala, Burma, and South Africa, were chosen and assigned the

¹³² Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion*, p. 31.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Gebre Hiwet Tesfagiorgis, *Eritrea: A Case of Self Determination* (Washington: Eritreans for Peace and Democracy), 1990, p. 28.

task “to ascertain more fully the wishes of the Eritrean People and the means of promoting their future welfare of the inhabitants of Eritrea and to prepare a report for the General Assembly.”¹³⁵

While such intentions appear noble in theory, the actual execution of the commission’s inquiry has been the subject of heated debate and controversy for more than fifty years. In January, 1990, Gebre Hiwet Tesfagiorgis, in a working paper for the organization *Eritreans for Peace and Democracy*, attested that while United Nations resolutions on self-determination are generally silent on the specific method of determining the wishes of a people, the most impartial and clear method of ascertaining community choice is plebiscite, which involves the consultation of a people by means of a vote.¹³⁶ However, according to Tesfagiorgis, “in the case of Eritrea, where plebiscite would have been appropriate given the relatively advanced political maturity of the people, plebiscite was not held.” Instead, as the British administrator in Eritrea at the time stated, “[t]he UN Commission did no more than carry out casual observations of rival political gatherings at each center and address random questions to persons whose representative qualities it had no means of checking.”¹³⁷

The end result, as Tesfagiorgis illustrates, was that the UN commission, much like the work of the previous Four Power Commission, did not pursue an impartial policy that sought collect the testimony of the Eritrean citizenry. This was particularly true with regard to how the Eritrean Muslims were systematically denied to present their views

¹³⁵ G.A.O.R, Fourth Session, *United Nations Resolution 289 (IV) Question of the Disposal of the Former Italian Colonies*, 250th Plenary Meeting, 21 November 1949.

¹³⁶ Tesfagiorgis, *Eritrea: A Case of Self-Determination*, p. 28. See also G. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition 1941-52*.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

before the commission. This was a fact not lost on the Commission's delegates from Guatemala and Pakistan, who in their final report to the General Assembly attested to the ongoing shifta activities as a major impediment to assessing the wishes of the Eritrean people. Citing the provocation of the shifta militants against Eritrean Muslims and others associated with anti-Unionist positions, which included continued harassment, intimidation, and even the construction of roadblocks to impede their journey to the commission, the delegates reiterated that "such criminal practices make it difficult to ascertain even approximately the true desire of those who now declare themselves in favor of annexation, as it cannot be that, in every case, the spontaneity of their political affiliation is guaranteed."¹³⁸ The treatment suffered by Muslims during the commission's visit grew so intense that the Pakistani delegate, Mian Faud-Dir actually confronted the Ethiopian Foreign Minister Akilou Habte-Wold on the matter.¹³⁹

While instances of intimidation and outright terrorism during the UN Commission's residence in Eritrea in many ways parallels the tactics that were used by Pro-Ethiopian forces during the earlier arrival of the Four Power Commission, the actions of shifta between the summer of 1949 and the February 1950 had far more serious consequences for Muslim communities as well as the future of Eritrean political parties. Although religious tensions had remained high and acts of Ethiopian-sponsored terrorism and harassment were routinely carried out during this period, there had not been a

¹³⁸ G.A.O.R., Fifth Session, Report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea, Supplements No.8 (A/1285).

¹³⁹ Ibid.

simultaneous and widespread breakdown of Eritrean social and political order due to sectarian violence; that changed on February 21st, 1950.¹⁴⁰

3.4 The Incident at Emba Derho

On the evening of February 20th, the head of the Emba Derho railway station, Nasaraddin Saeed Pasha Al-Jiberti, was attacked by five Christian shifta. Al-Jiberti had been a prominent member of the Moslem League who had been approached days earlier by pro-Ethiopian representatives and asked to join the Unionist Party. The attack was widely believed to be an act of retaliation for his refusal to withdraw from the League. Nevertheless, Al-Jiberti was eventually taken to a hospital in Asmara to be treated for his injuries. Unfortunately he died while in route to the city.¹⁴¹

The next morning, February 21st, representatives of the Moslem League brought Al-Jeberti's body to the Palaco Governario, where the office of the UN Commission was located. There, according to Jordan Gebre-Medhin, the "bullet-ridden body was displayed" before the international representatives, who urged calm and restraint to the League's leadership.¹⁴² By 3 p.m. the funeral procession had begun to make its way through Asmara towards the city's Muslim cemetery. Despite numbering nearly 10,000 mourners, the procession, which was lead by the Eritrean Mufti, Ibrahim Al-Mukhtar Ahmed Omar, and other Islamic community leaders, was described as behaving in a very orderly manner. Al-Jeberti's body was even adorned with the official flag of the Moslem

¹⁴⁰ Many of the subjects interviewed for this paper conveyed similar knowledge that Muslim residents of Eritrea's major cities, who generally subsisted as merchants and financiers, often lived in fear of pro-Ethiopian attackers from as far back as the late 1930s, when many Eritreans were seen as coconspirators in Italy's conquest of Abyssinia.

¹⁴¹ E. Correnti. Interviewed by Joseph Venosa, May 2006.

¹⁴² Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea*, p. 147. See also *Report of the UN Commission for Eritrea* (New York: United Nations), 1950.

League. As the procession made its way through Asmara, Christian shifta agents of the Unionist Party began to throw stones at the marchers.¹⁴³ This was soon augmented by the throwing of three hand grenades and the presence of sporadic gunfire. Eventually, several youths from the Moslem League responded by wielding swords and casualties were soon traded on both sides; the procession continued on until Al-Jeberti's body was buried.¹⁴⁴

Sectarian clashes continued throughout the following day, February 22nd. At one point, Christian and Moslem factions fought face to face in the center of "native headquarters," one of the most densely populated sections of Asmara.¹⁴⁵ BMA authorities then declared a curfew from 5 pm to 6 am in hopes of quelling the fighting, which was only reignited upon the end of the mandated curfew time. It was during this unrest that many Muslim merchants had their businesses attacked and in some cases completely destroyed; others were attacked by shifta in their homes within the city. With no end in sight to the violence, Francis Drew, the British governor of Eritrea, called an emergency meeting by community representatives that was attended by both the Mufti and the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. At the governor's request, the leaders agreed to go around the major sections of the city and advise people to cease acts of violence.

On February 24th, a four car convoy, consisting of a police escort, Francis Drew, the Mufti and Patriarch, and the Kadi of Asmara along with the assistant Patriarch, passed through the major neighborhoods of Edaga Arbi, Akhria, Edaga Hamous, Abba Shawl,

¹⁴³ Interview with E. Correnti.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants & Nationalism in Eritrea*, p. 148.

Haddish Addi, and Gaza Banda.¹⁴⁶ In each section of the city the religious leaders, using microphones, pleaded with residents to stop the violence and robbing of property.

Afterwards the convoy traveled to the local Asmara radio station where they preceded to take their message directly on air. While most accounts testify that Asmara residents took heed and stopped fighting, the looting of Muslim businesses in the city continued for nearly three more days before subsiding.¹⁴⁷

In spite of the destruction and chaos that took place in the latter days of February 1950, the Asmara riots represent two important transformations in the history not only of the Moslem League, but also of the collective notion of Islamic-oriented nationalism in Eritrea. The intensity and scope of the riots demonstrated that the issue of Eritrean independence was now largely drawn along religious lines, particularly in the capital city. The fact that the Ethiopian-sponsored shifta had attacked a publicly- displayed Muslim funeral procession helped to counter the political fracturing that had taken place up to that point among the various Islamic political groups and helped to actually unite Muslim nationalists against the aggression of the shifta. It also signified a turning point in which Muslim resolve towards both shifta activity and the independence struggle was on full display before British authorities, members of the UN Commission, as well as the highly influential Ethiopian Liaison Office. Even in the aftermath of the riots, the Liaison Office denied any involvement in the hostilities that had taken place, despite the fact that it was

¹⁴⁶ Interview with E. Correnti.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

well known that its staff, in coordination with officials in Axum and Adowa, had long been the primary executioners of armed campaigns against Muslims.¹⁴⁸

Perhaps even more important than these developments though was the remarkable degree of organization, practicality, and in some way, restraint that the Muslim leadership exhibited in dealing with the immediate political and social turmoil both the death of Al-Jeberti and the riots themselves. In choosing to bring the body of Al-Jeberti before the UN Commission, the leadership of the Moslem League made the conscious decision to actually bypass traditional Qur'ānic law by *not* having Al-Jeberti's body buried on the same day of his death, but instead displaying it in an attempt to emphasize the dramatic degree of injustice and belligerence demonstrated by the shifta and their allies in the Ethiopian government.¹⁴⁹

Even more remarkable however was the degree of restraint and moderation that Islamic community leaders exhibited in quelling acts of sectarian violence. In addition to the efforts of Ibrahim Al-Mukhtar in joining with the Patriarch of the Asmara to call off the violence that had engulfed the city, Muslim representatives also took the initiative in organizing a massive meeting in Asmara on Saturday, February 25th to discuss how they could avoid future violence as well as prevent acts of robbery against their respective Muslim-owned businesses.¹⁵⁰ Eventually Muslim community representatives in Asmara came to an agreement with local Church leaders by sending four representatives to carry out a public ceremony in which both sides agreed to swear that they would prevent future sectarian violence against each other. On March 24th, in a dramatic show of humility and

¹⁴⁸ See Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants & Nationalism in Eritrea*, p. 127.

¹⁴⁹ Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants & Nationalism in Eritrea*, p. 147.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with E. Correnti.

cooperation, Muslim leaders joined with their Christian counterparts in placing wreaths over the graves of all those who had died as a result of the riots.¹⁵¹

The kinds of events that had originally led to the riots had long been a concern for Eritrean Muslim nationalists, even among the representatives of the Moslem League at the United Nations. Since the fourth session of the General Assembly had convened in November of 1949, the League had expressed serious concerns about how shifta activity threatened not only the work of the UN's recently appointed Five-Power Commission, but also the stability of the region itself. By late 1949 the delegation was running out of patience with both the general assembly and the BMA:

It is a fact that the Eritrean hinterland is today at the mercy of the terrorist bandits who are shamelessly active on behalf of foreign elements. Acts of robbery and arson have become quite common and are reminiscent of the dark ages, so much so that communications between the principal towns have been seriously interrupted except for caravans under police guard. Yet the present Administration in Eritrea has taken no serious step to crush these bandits and to rid the country of their terror, whereas this action would be within its power had it cared to fulfill its obligations to the Eritrean people.¹⁵²

In addition, Moslem League representatives also made a point of expressing their concern over how the shifta had worked to compromise the findings of the UN Commission by dressing up as Moslems and had traveled to towns and villages where the commission was present. The League also accused the Ethiopian state of providing many of the shifta with the transportation needed to cross into and out of Eritrea from the Ethiopian borderlands.¹⁵³ Despite the adamant pleas of the Moslem League and increased concern of community leaders in bringing the political crisis to a logical end, Eritrean Muslims

¹⁵¹ Ibid. It is alleged that instances of violence continued in certain parts of the city for several days after the ceremony.

¹⁵² 49th meeting of the *ad hoc* Political Committee, 21 November 1949, U.N. Document A/AC.38/L.46, pp. 120-126.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

found that the multinational commission was equally perplexed and divergent regarding Eritrea's future.

3.5 The Commission's Report

Between the 3rd and the 17th of May, 1950 the delegates from Burma, South Africa, Guatemala, Pakistan, and Norway convened in Geneva, Switzerland to draw up their final report regarding their assessment of Eritrea's political future.¹⁵⁴ Ultimately labeled as the *Report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea*, the findings of the commission revealed how each respective delegation had established very different views regarding not only the feasibility of an independent political apparatus in Eritrea, but also the exact degree of influence and importance that Muslim nationalist elements constituted within the region. The commission was essentially split into three camps; South Africa and Burma championed the creation of a federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia; Pakistan and Guatemala proposed that Eritrea be granted complete independence following a period of UN trusteeship that would not exceed ten years; the Norwegian delegation favored the integration of Eritrea with Ethiopia, with the possibility that both the Western Province and the lowlands adjoining Sudan would remain under control of the BMA.¹⁵⁵

Compared to the other delegates, the findings of the Pakistani and Guatemalan representatives expressed a much more pronounced recognition of the importance of religion in political ideology of Eritreans as well as an obvious concern for how external influences had compromised their inquiry in assessing the overall strength of the

¹⁵⁴ Yohannes, *Eritrea, a Pawn in World Politics*, p. 158.

¹⁵⁵ Tesfagiorgis, *Eritrea: A Case of Self-Determination*, p. 29. See G.A.O.R., Fifth Session, Report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea, Supplements No.8 (A/1285).

independence movement among the general population. In the official memorandum submitted by the delegations of Pakistan and Guatemala, the representatives commented that “the influence of religion is a preponderant factor in the development of political trends in Eritrea” and that the specific religious beliefs of Muslims and Christians were closely connected to their adherence in being either *for* or *against* Eritrean independence.¹⁵⁶ Not surprisingly, the delegates also noted the irregularities when conducting hearings among different Eritrean communities. The delegates testified:

“It was noticed at our field hearings that the representatives who came to make statements repeated the same answers to questions put to them and gave the impression that they had been carefully rehearsed. Whenever questions were put to the crowd, the answers were confused and unintelligible”¹⁵⁷

The representatives went on in their report to state that several of the meetings featured “Coptic Christian supporters of the Unionist Party” that had disguised themselves as Muslims in an effort to dupe the commission. This is an important observation because it helps to confirm the original concerns that had been first reported by the Moslem League to the General Assembly months earlier. Likewise, the delegates also took note of the fact that many Unionist supporters who attended the commission’s hearings had worn military uniforms, a curious observation that only helps to validate the assertion that members of the Ethiopian military apparatus maintained a heavy presence in the towns where the commission tried to assess the “local” consensus on the question of independence.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ *Memorandum Submitted by the Delegations of Guatemala and Pakistan*, in G.A.O.R., Fifth Session, Report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea, Supplements No.8 (A/1285).

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

The memorandum also featured an addendum by the Pakistani delegation that stated “the apprehensions of the Muslim Population are justified by the conditions prevailing in Ethiopia up to the present time.”¹⁵⁹ This is an especially peculiar statement when it is placed in the context of how the other delegations articulated their “concerns” for Eritrea’s Muslim communities. The proposal submitted by the delegations of Burma and South Africa mentioned that the complete incorporation of Eritrea with Ethiopia would not sufficiently safeguard the “rights and interests of the large Moslem community.”¹⁶⁰ Yet, almost immediately after raising these concerns, the delegates argued that such issues could readily be solved if the creation of a federation between the two states was enacted. Taking into account the fact that the delegates themselves had witnessed firsthand the level of hostility between religious factions in Asmara and the blatant role of Ethiopian forces in supporting and aiding both the shifta terrorists and officials of the Unionist party, the very idea that a federation would help bring about the “domestic autonomy of both countries” seems improbable almost to the point of preposterous.¹⁶¹

The conclusions established by the Burmese and South African delegations also omitted nearly all of the documented instances of intimidation, violence, murder, and misrepresentation that were carried out by Unionist elements within Eritrea during the Commission’s residency. In addition, the delegates’ testimony also conveniently left out the notable instances of fraud that were committed in their presence when traveling

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. The Guatemalan and Pakistani delegations also indicated that the BMA’s estimate that Eritrea’s population was divided evenly between Muslims and Coptic Christians was in conflict with the Moslem League’s own estimate that Muslims made up nearly 70 percent of the general population.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

through the region, particularly the Christian-dominated highlands. Even British officials such as Frank Stafford made mention of these occurrences. A telegram from Stafford to the Foreign Office in London documents what the delegates neglected to reveal in their own report:

“Another foolish trick of the Unionist Party from which I have tried in vain to dissuade them, is the movement by devious routes of numbers of their storm troopers and party officials from one meeting to another where their faces are promptly recognized by the Commission.”¹⁶²

Amazingly, the delegates’ omission of the malevolent activities on the part of Unionists and shifta was accompanied by a dramatic de-emphasis on the importance of religious differences in the political climate. This was perhaps most blatant in the Norwegian delegation’s report in which the representatives declared that the religious divisions within Eritrea were to a great extent “artificial” and that they had been created among the predominantly Muslim population because of the “confusion in the mind of the primitive masses who are supposed to support the independent movement as to the true meaning of the word “independence” in opposition to the word “union.”¹⁶³ Incredibly, the delegations statements were in stark contrast to those experienced officials within the BMA who made consistent statements that the political factions that been largely based on religious orientation. This was a reality that even Kennedy Trevaskis emphasized, stating that Eritreans “had rallied under their rival religious banners and now stood divided against one another in opposing Muslim and Christian factions.”¹⁶⁴

3.6 Mandating Eritrea’s Future and the Significance of Muslim Political Elements

¹⁶² FO 371/80985, Stafford to Allen, 3/16/1950.

¹⁶³ *Proposals by the Delegation of Norway*, in G.A.O.R., Fifth Session, Report of the United Nations Commission for Eritrea, Supplements No.8 (A/1285).

¹⁶⁴ Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, p. 76.

Consequently, the commission's findings were presented to the UN General Assembly in late June and were debated for several months. Finally, on December 2nd 1950, the General Assembly voted 46 to 10 to pass Resolution 390-A, calling for the creation of a Federation between Eritrea and the Ethiopian government.¹⁶⁵ While the resolution was officially proclaimed as a political compromise in which Eritrea "would constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian crown," the legislation can be viewed as the ultimate confirmation that the political consensus of the majority of the Eritrean people had been compromised on behalf of the UN Commission.¹⁶⁶ Though charged with assessing the "wishes of the Eritrean people," the majority of the delegates presented a distorted account of what they witnessed firsthand during their stay of inquiry. The over-simplified and highly partisan reports of the South African, Burmese, and Norwegian representatives only serve to demonstrate how little the parties were concerned with the actual demands of Eritreans, particularly Muslim activists, whose own political cause was often misunderstood, misrepresented, or completely ignored by the delegates.

With the passage of Resolution 390A, it was assumed by many in the General Assembly that any further issues related to Eritrean independence would be resolved through the region's own semi-autonomous political apparatus.¹⁶⁷ The decision to proceed with an Eritrean-Ethiopian Federation did not, however, put an end to either

¹⁶⁵ Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, p. 23.

¹⁶⁶ Tekie Fessehazion, *Eritrea: From Federation to Annexation 1952-1962* (Washington: Eritreans for Peace and Democracy), 1990, p. 11.

¹⁶⁷ In the following section, this paper will explore in detail how the social realities experienced by Eritrean Muslims helped develop a much more pronounced and even militant resistance movement for the cause of independence.

sectarian violence or provide an increased situation of stability and security in the country. In early 1951, the United Nations Commissioner in Eritrea, Eduardo Anze Matienzo, announced that no progress could be made on implementing either a constitution or a workable bureaucratic network until the security situation improved:

I do not believe it advisable to begin these consultations at a time when the population, which desires peace and security above all else, is in danger. Furthermore, I do not think it proper that I should travel about the country flying the flag of the United Nations, over roads stained with the blood of people attacked by terrorists.¹⁶⁸

While the United Nations and the remaining forces of the BMA mulled over how to contain and prevent continued shifta attacks. Muslim communities from across Eritrea began taking matters into their own hands. In an effort to stem the continuous and paralytic violence that engulfed the major population centers, especially in regions where Islam was the minority religion, many different Muslim peoples created informal alliances with each other as a way of safeguarding both their personal safety as well as their property. One of the most noted instances of this phenomenon occurred between 1949 and 1951 in the Serai province (in the modern day Southern Administrative region), where the Muslim minority, in an effort to stave-off repeated arson attacks, robberies and assassinations of the most vocal opponents of the Unionist Party, allied with members of the Beni-Amir as well as with Saho speakers from the eastern lowlands to fight against the bands of roaming shifta.¹⁶⁹

The unrest and destruction caused by the shifta only helped to stiffen the resolve of Muslim nationalists. In witnessing how the Ethiopian regime had tacitly supported the terrorist activities of the Unionists and their shifta allies, most Muslims were convinced

¹⁶⁸ *Progress Report of the United Nations Commissioner in Eritrea, 1951 (A/1959)*, p. 177. See also Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, p. 103.

¹⁶⁹ Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition*, p. 109.

that they would forever retain their status as “second class citizens” if they remained politically dominated by Ethiopia. Countless Muslim villagers relayed stories that during this time the clergy of the Eritrean Orthodox Church actually told Muslims to their faces that “they were not equals” on matters pertaining to the country’s future.¹⁷⁰

With such prejudice emanating from the regional Christian leadership, Muslims and their respective community leaders were conscious of the fact that their social betterment and cultural integrity were dependent on the creation of an Eritrean state that was free from the influence of the Ethiopian crown. As a result, many of the most outspoken nationalist leaders continued to yield great authority among the members of their communities, often being consulted by the youth about where they should direct their political support. One of the more colorful instances of this kind of leadership occurred in the village of Hirgigo near Massawa in which Saleh Pasha Ahmed Kekia, a prominent merchant and industrialist, was approached by a group of young men who asked him if they should support either the Unionist or Independence cause.¹⁷¹ In response, Kekia provided an anecdote about how he, during the late 1930s, once had to wait two hours for a bridge to be completed when traveling from Dessie to Mekele that was being fixed by the Italian military. “But today,” he told them, “if a bridge needs repair, it would not be completed in two years let alone in two hours.” As a result, the youths decided in favor of independence and joined the Muslim League.¹⁷² This brief example helps to illustrate another important focus that Muslim nationalists emphasized through their respective organizations: there was a fundamental and dangerous

¹⁷⁰ Interview with E. Correnti.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

“backwardness” within the Ethiopian system that was seen as an anathema in the lives of most Eritreans.

Owing largely to the fact that Eritrea already possessed a moderately advanced public infrastructure from the resources of Italian settlers as well as the Italian military, native Eritreans, it can be said, experienced a much greater degree of intercultural exposure with both the European (Italian) settler community as well as with transient merchants from the Arabian peninsula. To be sure, Eritrea’s position as an epicenter of Italian militarism for roughly fifty years had included the construction of countless warehouses, factories, customs offices, office buildings, oil storage tankers, and ports.¹⁷³ Consequently, many Eritrean Muslims felt that they were “better educated and developed” when compared to the largely isolated, archaic feudal system in Ethiopia.¹⁷⁴ This perception, as we shall examine in the next section, was to be a major point of contention among Eritrean Muslims, who, with the implementation of the “Federation,” witnessed a greater and greater degree of exclusion, disenfranchisement, and persecution from the Ethiopian State.

Additionally, many Eritrean Muslims also had deeply ingrained fears towards the establishment of a federation that were largely based on the long history of oppression that Muslims had suffered under the reign of successive Ethiopian Emperors since as late as the latter half of the 19th century. Throughout the remembered history of Eritrea, Muslim communities were plundered and subjugated by Ethiopian monarchs, warlords, and their vassals in a variety of ways. Some were pressured-under pain of death-to

¹⁷³ Wrong, *I Didn't do It For You*, p.115

¹⁷⁴ Bohashem Bohashem. Interviewed by Joseph Venosa, May 2006.

convert to Christianity, others were prevented from owning land, and still others were tortured for a variety of political reasons. One of the most gruesome acts on record occurred in 1896 in the aftermath of the Battle of Adowa. Reports speculate that after defeating the mixed army of Italian and Eritrean soldiers, Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II allowed Abune Matewos, the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Church, to cut off the left hand and right foot of all Eritrean soldiers that had been taken prisoner after the battle because of their status as “traitors” to both the Emperor and to the Ethiopian nation.¹⁷⁵ In contrast, the majority of Italian soldiers, although initially taken as enemies of the Ethiopian state, were left physically unharmed and were soon returned to the Italian colonial authorities in Eritrea.¹⁷⁶

These historical fears were especially potent among the older generations of highland Muslims who told stories of the reign of Ethiopian Emperor Yohannes (r. 1872-1889) who, as a noble from the region of Tigray, had issued proclamations ordering all Muslims in his domain to either convert to Christianity or be killed by imperial forces.¹⁷⁷ In the words of one Eritrean man, the stories of these Muslim elders “sent shivers down the spines” of many younger generations, even those who were not even alive to remember the influence of the Ethiopian Emperors. The fact that Haile Selassie had declared his nation a Christian Kingdom where Orthodox Christianity was the official

¹⁷⁵ Chris Prouty, *Empress Taytu and Menelik II: Ethiopia 1883-1910* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1986), p. 158. See also C. de la Jonquiere, *Les Italiens en Erythrie* (Paris, 1897); Haile, *The Collusion on Eritrea*, p. 44. Some accounts state that it was actually Ras Mengesha Yohannes, a noble from Tigrè who was given authority over the Eritrean prisoners and was ultimately responsible for the decision to inflict mutilation.

¹⁷⁶ For the estimated 1900 captured Italian soldiers, many would face the trying prospect of having to make the near 500 mile trek with Menelik’s forces from Adowa to Addis Ababa where they were later exchanged. See Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: White Man’s Conquest of the Dark Continent From 1876 to 1912* (New York: Avon Books), 1991, p. 484.

¹⁷⁷ Saleh Qadi. Interviewed by Joseph Venosa, May, 2006.

religion certainly did not help to quell the fears and apprehensions of most Muslims, even as Eritrea entered into a political climate that supposedly championed the region's domestic autonomy.¹⁷⁸

3.7 Conclusions

During the late 1940s until the conclusion of the UN Commission's inquiry in early 1950, different factions of Muslim nationalists demonstrated extremely diverse political agendas. Some groups, such as the IML, NMPM, and the MLWP, exhibited noticeable concerns for how the actions of Eritrea's largest Muslim-oriented political party, the Moslem League, had affected their own respective communities. As such, these Muslim groups did not follow one particular political line but rather exhibited immense political pluralism, showcasing the increasingly complex nature of religion and politics in the movement for Eritrean independence. That being said, the efforts of Eritrean Muslims in uniting to form the Independence Bloc in mid-1949 represent the culmination of Muslim Eritrean political unity and power in the immediate period prior to the establishment of the UN-supported Federation. While it was short-lived, the Bloc's very existence (as well as its considerable influence) helped demonstrate that a substantial majority of Eritreans were in fact in favor of independence rather than union with Ethiopia. The fact that a majority of the Bloc's leadership originated from positions within the Moslem League also illustrates that even within this Muslim-dominated consortium, its members were-at the very least- open to the possibility of working with non-Muslims to achieve the ultimate objective of autonomy, including communities of

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

Italian-settlers, war veterans and pro-independence Eritrean Christians of the Liberal Progressive Party.¹⁷⁹

Likewise, the ability of both the Moslem League and the greater Islamic community in uniting to speak out against the incursions of the shifta also exhibits the fundamental concerns that Eritrean Muslims expressed as a collective religious *and* political identity. During this intense and crucial period, Eritrean Muslims worked to establish a highly disciplined and practical political base, even as such chaotic events as the murder of Nasaraddin Saeed Pasha Al-Jiberti and the ensuing Muslim-Christian riots that took place throughout Asmara. While being handed a definite political setback with the UN's erroneous decision to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia, Muslim-oriented organizations from across the region had already proven to the BMA, the international community, and the Ethiopian monarchy by 1950 that the movement for Eritrean independence could not be simply crushed through subversive diplomatic maneuvers and acts of intimidation and violence.

¹⁷⁹ Sultan and Woldemariam had enjoyed a personal friendship throughout their respective efforts in the independence movement, and both had been founding members of the Party of Love of Country (PLC), one of the earliest nationalist organizations, founded in 1941. The organization also included future Moslem League officials Abdul Kadir Kebire and Mohamed Omar Kadi, the former who was shot and killed just days before he was scheduled to travel to New York present the League's case before the General Assembly. See Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants & Nationalism in Eritrea*, p. 78.

Chapter 4: The Federation and Resistance, 1952-1961

The temptation to subject Eritrea firmly under her [Ethiopia's] control will always be great. Should she try to do so, she will risk Eritrean discontent and eventual revolt, which, with foreign sympathy and support, might well disrupt both Eritrea and Ethiopia herself.¹⁸⁰

Kennedy Trevaskis

While the creation of the Eritrean-Ethiopian federation in September of 1952 was viewed by many Eritrean nationalists as the most dramatic example of their nation's endangered sovereignty, in the history of the independence struggle it can be viewed merely as the catalyst for a series of events and legislative acts that would help to induce the erosion of Eritrean autonomy under the Ethiopian monarchy. Between September 1952 and November 1962, Eritreans witnessed their country transform from a prospective autonomous nation to a suppressed and beleaguered region subjected to the colonial policies of the Ethiopian leadership.¹⁸¹ The creation and implementation of the federation was especially detrimental for many Eritrean Muslims, as it only helped to institutionalize the long-held prejudices of the Ethiopian state against the followers of Islam. The following chapter will analyze how the expansion of nationalist sentiment among Eritrean Muslims was, in part, the result of the aggressive and often exclusionary practices that became the trademark of Ethiopian rule during the period of "Federation."

4.1 The Federation Commences

Almost immediately after the Union Jack was lowered in front of the BMA headquarters in Asmara on September 15th, 1952, the regime of Haile Sellassie began to pursue an aggressive campaign to revoke the "autonomy" that had been promised to

¹⁸⁰ Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition 1941-52*, p. 131.

¹⁸¹ The term "colonial" should be understood in this context to have the same traditional connotation as the actions and policies of domination taken by European entities against African societies during the 19th and twentieth centuries.

Eritrea through Resolution 390-A and through the stipulations of the Eritrean constitution. Ratified on September 11th 1952, the constitution guaranteed that an elected body of representatives would have legislative, executive, and judicial jurisdiction over all domestic issues, including the organization of public services, maintenance of internal police, health, education, public assistance and social security, agriculture, and internal communications as well as other aspects of regional governance.¹⁸²

However, as Bairu Tafla has noted, Haile Sellassie was determined to “undermine the new structure” of the Eritrean government, and took several measures in an attempt to cement a permanent Ethiopian presence in the region. He began by appointing a representative-his own son-in-law, Andargatchew Messai, to reside in Asmara who soon involved himself in almost every area of government.¹⁸³ Equally important to the Emperor’s agenda was the election of Tedla Bairu an ardent unionist, to the position of Chief Executive of the Eritrean government.¹⁸⁴ On September 15th Haile Selassie sent the very first contingent of Ethiopian soldiers, a detachment of one hundred men, across the border at Senafe to be stationed in Asmara.¹⁸⁵ Not long after this, the regime began to openly support pro-Ethiopian representatives to the Eritrean parliament, while simultaneously discouraging the mainly pro-independence Muslim delegates from running for elected office.

The Ethiopian government’s most effective methods for manipulating and circumventing Eritrea’s sovereignty was the blatant marginalization and subsequent

¹⁸² Habtu Ghebre-Ab, *Ethiopia and Eritrea: A Documentary Study* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1993), pp. 202-232.

¹⁸³ Bairu Tefla, “Eritrea: Remote Past and Present,” *Journal of Eritrean Studies* 3 (2004): p. 92.

¹⁸⁴ Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*, p. 78.

¹⁸⁵ Fessehatzion, *Eritrea: From Federation to Annexation, 1952-1963*, p. 28.

disenfranchisement of Eritrean Muslims, and was dependant on the help of Eritreans themselves. The Ethiopian government had long realized what it stood to gain by favoring Eritrea's influential highland Orthodox Christian communities at the expense of Muslims. As one observer has commented, "Ethiopia was not interested in entertaining any kind of autonomy that made Eritrea 'separate' to Ethiopia. Hence, from day one and with the help of their Christian highlander allies, they worked to undermine the autonomous status of Eritrea."¹⁸⁶ This policy began with discrimination practices within the Ethiopian civil administration in Eritrea, as employment in Ethiopian-owned enterprises such as government offices, banks, and transportation services was dominated exclusively by Christian highlanders, who were considered "loyal" to Ethiopia for their general consensus as pro-Unionist supporters as well as for their cultural and religious links to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.¹⁸⁷ This favoritism was also evident in the state's allocation of money towards education-University scholarships funded by the Ethiopian government were accessible to Eritreans only if they were Christians. As a result, Eritrean Muslims, generally viewed as disloyal and fundamentally different from their Christian counterparts, were denied the opportunity to study either in Addis Ababa or in universities in Europe, leaving large numbers of discontented youth with few, if any prospects for education or meaningful employment.¹⁸⁸

While pursuing its diplomatic agenda by gradually taking control of all aspects of the Eritrean government, the Ethiopian monarchy was simultaneously using less subtle tools of oppression against Muslim communities, making use of its military prowess,

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Bohashen Bohashem.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Interview with Saleh Qadi.

particularly in the western province outside of the major cities. Throughout the early years of the Federation, the state began to train Christian highlanders as soldiers under the direction of the Ethiopian military, eventually establishing large-scale commando units designed to patrol cities and villages throughout Eritrea. It would be these same commandos who, following Ethiopia's official annexation of Eritrea in 1962, would conduct merciless raids against entire Muslim communities, often forcing residents to flee across the Sudanese-Eritrean border as the soldiers pursued a "scorched-Earth policy" against those Muslims who were suspected of subversive activity towards the Ethiopian presence.¹⁸⁹

As Ethiopia's military apparatus developed within the western territory, in Asmara Eritreans watched on as their elected government was steadily overtaken under the authority of Haile Sellassie. Following Bairu's resignation from the office of Chief Executive in August of 1955, his replacement, Asfaha Wolemichael, who served simultaneously as Deputy Representative to the Emperor, pursued an even more aggressive policy of Ethiopian domination designed to effectively "liquidate the Federation."¹⁹⁰ In 1956, against the stipulations of the Eritrean Constitution, Asfaha officially abolished all political parties within the nation and also gave the commissioner of the Ethiopian-supported Police extraordinary powers "by which the commissioner could put in jail anyone for up to ten days without bringing any charges."¹⁹¹

This decree was used almost immediately against Muslim critics of Asfaha; nationalist figures Omar Kadi, Sheik Suleiman Ahmed, and Imam Mussa were arrested

¹⁸⁹ Interview with Bohashem Bohashem.

¹⁹⁰ Haile, *The Collusion on Eritrea*, p. 125.

¹⁹¹ Fessehatzion, *Eritrea: From Federation to Annexation 1952-1962*, p. 38.

and brought before federal court after sending petitions to the UN documenting Ethiopia's aggression through the provisions of Resolution 390-A.¹⁹² For Kadi, the Ethiopian authorities imposed a sentence of ten years, providing the paltry claim that he had made statements abroad that sought to "bring the Ethiopian government into disrepute."¹⁹³ Ahmed (the brother of the Eritrean Mufti Sheik Ibrahim Al-Mukhtar Ahmed Omar) and his colleague, Imam Mussa (himself the former president of the Moslem League's Asmara branch) received similarly harsh prison sentences, the news of which reverberated throughout Eritrea's Muslim community.¹⁹⁴ The incarceration of such prominent figures of the nationalist movement demonstrated once again to an already disenfranchised community that the Ethiopian administration would not tolerate dissent.

1956 also saw the implementation of crucial policy changes establishing Amharic, Ethiopia's official language, as the official language of Eritrea, effectively dismantling Article 38 of the Eritrean constitution, which had guaranteed the promotion of Tigrinya and Arabic as the state languages.¹⁹⁵ For Arabic-speaking Muslims, this change was especially traumatic; Muslim students were largely unable to pass state-sponsored Amharic language exams, and, as a result, were forced to drop out of school. For the older generations of Arabic speakers, learning Amharic became yet another obstacle standing between Muslims and their rights as Eritrean citizens as the government required that all official state business, including civil disputes and individual grievances

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ F.O. 371/131245. BCA to BEAA 12/5/58.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 27.

be conducted in Amharic. Further distancing this new Eritrea from its past identity was the highly symbolic act of replacing the Eritrean Flag with the Federal, or Ethiopian Flag in December of 1958. By 1959, the Emperor had allowed for the Ethiopian penal code to replace previously existing Eritrean law.¹⁹⁶ And by May of 1960, the Unionist-dominated Eritrean Parliament watched as the seal of Eritrean government was changed to read “Eritrean Administration under Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia.”¹⁹⁷

It was in this decidedly oppressive political climate that Eritrean Muslims began to emerge, organize, and conclude that Eritrea’s independence could only be achieved through direct confrontation and defeat of the aims of the Ethiopian state. As the decade progressed, the intentions and influence of the predominately Muslim nationalists-who sought to claim a truly independent Eritrea rather than a puppet state under what was often termed a “Sham” federation- crystallized, and concrete plans for action arose among the nationalist leadership who were determined to see their hopes for their country made real. As Fessehatzion has articulated, “in their zeal to Ethiopianize the Eritrean government and its institutions, the Ethiopians engendered the hostility of a large segment of the Eritrean population.”¹⁹⁸

4.2 A Revitalized Struggle

As early as 1953, many Eritrean nationalist figures, including Ibrahim Sultan, fled to live abroad, continuing to work toward building nationalist sentiment against Ethiopian

¹⁹⁶ Yohannes, *Eritrea, A Pawn in World Politics*, p. 192.

¹⁹⁷ Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 28.

¹⁹⁸ Fessehatzion, *Eritrea: From Federation to Annexation, 1952-1962*, p. 28. Although the population had grown by nearly 15 percent from 1950 to 1961, there were fewer people employed in 1961 (38,000) than there had been in 1950 (53,000). See Loomam to State Department, “further Notes Concerning the Impact of Federation on the Economy of Eritrea,” 875a 00/1-3162, January 31, 1962.

domination while in exile.¹⁹⁹ Sudan and Egypt became the adopted homes of the majority of these exiled nationalists, many of whom had been involved in the early days of the Moslem League and the Independence Block. Both Sultan and Idris Muhammed Adem (the former president of the Eritrean Assembly) fled via Sudan to Cairo, where by the late 1950s they had established a base of operations. Thereafter, an assortment of mainly Muslim Eritrean exiles began to trickle into the city, among them individuals who were to play substantial roles in later years during the armed struggle, people such as Mohamed Saleh Mohamoud, Osman S. Sabbe, Idris O. Glawadewos, and Mohamed Saleh Humad.²⁰⁰

There are several possible reasons why Cairo became the chosen destination of so many Eritrean nationalists. Some observers have concluded that this occurred primarily because by the mid-1950s Cairo had become one of the major centers of a growing Arab nationalist movement across the region, which had found nourishment and inspiration under the leadership of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel-Nasser.²⁰¹ It has been suggested that the presence of other nationalist movements-including the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) as well as a large number of Palestinian nationalists-may have enticed increasing numbers of Eritrean exiles to organize. While this is entirely possible, it can also be said that Cairo was also simply the recipient of a large number of ambitious young men who had left Eritrea as the region's economy collapsed under with

¹⁹⁹ Sultan was allegedly in "semi retirement" from politics during this period. See FO371/138027. BCA to BEAA, 16/3/59.

²⁰⁰ Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*, p. 138.

²⁰¹ Nasser himself is said to have only given verbal support for the cause of Eritrean independence because he "valued good relations with the venerable Haile Selassie" and also because Ethiopia had control over the headwaters of the Nile, which was essential to Egypt's survival. See Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning*, p. 94.

the withering federation. By the mid-1950s, many Eritreans had fled to Middle Eastern countries including Egypt, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia, in search of work as well as opportunities to further their education, resulting in a widespread “brain drain” throughout Eritrea.²⁰²

Another major reason as to why so many Eritrean Muslims sought refuge in Cairo may have been rooted in a deeper, more historical context than some historians have typically observed. Cairo had long held an important place for Eritrean Muslims, especially for the generations of Islamic scholars from Eritrea who sought instruction at Cairo’s prestigious Al-Azhar Al-Sharif University.²⁰³ Some of Eritrea’s most prominent Islamic scholars, including Ibrahim Al-Mukhtar Ahmed Omar, attended the University after engaging in preliminary study throughout Sudan. Other Eritrean ulemas even claimed to have had ancestors who attended the school as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As the regional epicenter for Islamic learning, the institution had a special status among Muslim communities throughout western Eritrea and the coastal lowlands, many of whom belonged to Sufi orders that had also established their presence in eastern Sudan. Consequently, Cairo boasted a fairly large population of resident Eritreans even prior to the influx of exiles that arrived during the 1950s. Indeed, as one Eritrean Muslim has observed, “to have a son attend Al-Azhar Al-Sharif was a tremendous honor. Any family would be proud of such an accomplishment.”²⁰⁴ For the generation of Eritrean Muslims that came of age during the turbulent period of early and mid-1950s, the importance of attending institutions such as Al-Azhar may have only

²⁰² Khalid Beshir. Interviewed by Joseph Venosa. August, 2006

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

helped to strengthen their identity as both pious Muslims and eager students hoping to learn from the ulemas.

4.3 A Question of Faith

In observing how Eritrean Muslims contributed to the nationalist movement during this period, it must first be asked *why* it occurred in the specific manner that it did. While the previous chapters have discussed how Islam was used and perceived by others as a tool in development of nationalism, the attention must now be placed on the intrinsic components within the faith that aided and gave so many Muslims a liturgical foundation to seek the creation of an independent Eritrea. For many Muslims living under the rule of the Ethiopian-Eritrean Federation, the actions of Asfaha and other Ethiopian officials were seen as the embodiment of injustice and oppression for their efforts to dismantle any remnants of Eritrean sovereignty. Pious Muslims viewed the ongoing situation as a direct affront to the tenets of their faith. Commanding good and forbidding evil (*amr bi al-maruf wa nahyan al-munkar*) is a “cardinal Qur’ānic principle which lies at the root of many Islamic laws and institutions.”²⁰⁵ This principle, termed *Hisbah*, has traditionally been viewed as a theme or general guideline with societal, rather than individual, implications. However, in the instance when an individual witnesses an act of evil being committed, *Hisbah* does become an “individual obligation” (*fard ayni*).²⁰⁶

Islamic scholar Mustafa al-Sibai has noted that the primary focus of *hisbah* is the well-being of society, because it lays down the foundation of “social liberty” (al-

²⁰⁵ Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Freedom of Expression in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing SDN. BHD. 1994), p. 30.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

hurriyyah alijmaiyyah).²⁰⁷ *Hisbah*'s role within society has become open to the interpretation that there is an inherent obligation for a Muslim to speak out and correct what he or she perceives as evil. The following Qur'ānic verse, according to Kamali, has been traditionally used by ulemas to convey the Qur'ānic authority on *hisbah*:

Let there be (*waltakun*) from among you a group that calls others to good work, they command good and forbid evil. These are the successful ones (*muflihun*).²⁰⁸

There are other similar instances in which this same general principle of forbidding acts of evil has been interpreted as a community obligation. The eleventh-century Persian theologian Abu Hāmid Muhammed Al-Ghazāli (d. 1058-1111), explained that because this aforementioned āyāh begins with a direct command (*waltakun*) and because it implores followers through the phrase “let there arise from among you,” it can be construed as a communal responsibility to prevent what they perceive as evil and unjust so that good may triumph.²⁰⁹

Within the framework of the political and social developments occurring in Eritrea during the 1950s, these religious principles could certainly have provided an added degree of justification for independence-minded Muslims, who witnessed their culture, language, and overall autonomy steadily disintegrate under an Ethiopian monarchy that officially declared itself an Orthodox Christian kingdom. For many Eritrean Muslims, the oppression that was so commonplace by the decade's end-in the form of discrimination in employment and education as well as the arrests and officially

²⁰⁷ Mustafa al-Sibai, *Ishṭirākiyyah al-Islam* (Damascus: Dār al-Qawmiyyah li-al-Tabā-ah wa al-Nashr, 1960), p. 52. Translation by Abel Nouri, August, 2006.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Abu Hāmid Muhammad Al-Ghazāli, *Ihya'-Ulūm al-Din* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, 1980), p. 304. Translation by Abdel Nouri, August, 2006.

sanctioned harassment of anyone who dared criticize the Ethiopian administration or its unionist supporters-was in direct violation of the following Hadith:

If any one of you sees something evil, he should set it right by his hands; if he is unable to do so, then by his tongue, and if he is unable to do even that, then (let him denounce it) in his heart. But this is the weakest form of faith.²¹⁰

Though there is little surviving testimony from the nationalist politicians within Eritrea on the subject during the time in question, there are various accounts of Eritrean Muslims who were distressed, from both a theological and a political standpoint, by the continued development of Ethiopian domination and the inability of the Eritrean citizenry to thwart it. One member of the Eritrean Parliament, Sheik Osman Hindi from the Massawa area, is said to have gone before his constituents on numerous occasions during Haile Sellassie's attempts to dissolve the Federation and, repeating the above-mentioned verse, warned them of the "fear of god" if they failed to stop the continuing injustice.²¹¹ In later years, Hindi was also part of a small group of pro-nationalist Muslim parliamentarians who, along with Mohammed Omar Akito and Mahoud Omar, met with Adem Melekin, then a representative of the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM), who discussed the practicality and inevitability of an armed struggle in achieving Eritrea's freedom.²¹²

These developments were influenced in part by the nature of Sufi brotherhoods within Eritrea. As Carl W. Ernst has written, there is a degree of "prescriptive ethics" bound up in Sufi rhetoric that "cannot be put into effect by isolated hermits."²¹³ Ernest

²¹⁰ Kamali, *Freedom of Expression in Islam*, p. 33. See Ibn al-Hajjāj al-Nīshāpuri Muslim, *Mukhtasar Sahīh Muslim* (Beirut: Dār al-Maktab al-Islami, 1984), p. 16.

²¹¹ Interview with Khalid Beshir.

²¹² Saleh Qadi. *Adem Melekin: A Brick in the Foundation of Eritrea*. [Updated 11 April 2005; Cited 12 August 2006]. Available from http://www.awate.com/artman/publish/article_4061.shtml.

²¹³ Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), p. 211.

explains that “Sufis are constantly reminded of this by the model of the Prophet Muhammad, who plays for them the role of social and political leader as well as mystical exemplar.”²¹⁴ Thus, it can be said that the connection between Islam and the Eritrean nationalist movement was certainly affected by the elements of social justice and communal consciousnesses that were promoted in the practices and ideology of Sufism in the region. This helps to demonstrate another aspect of the cause for concern among Eritrean Muslims, who, apart from the knowledge that they were witnessing the recolonization of their nation, also took to heart their obligations as devout Muslims. These religious and societal perceptions, which had long been promulgated by Sufi brotherhoods primarily in the lowland communities, should be taken into account when examining Eritrean Muslims’ use, first through political organizations such as the Moslem League, and its affiliated spiritual leadership and later through their nationalist representatives within the ill-fated Federation, of the banner of Islam as a means of rallying support for the cause of independence.²¹⁵

4.4 The Eritrean Liberation Movement

Toward the end of the 1950s the Eritrean nationalist movement entered another important phase of development: overt, organized armed resistance. One of the earliest foundations for Eritrean resistance was initiated by a former guerilla fighter who has spent the majority of his life in neighboring Sudan. Throughout the 1950s, as Ibrahim Sultan and other Eritrean nationalists in Cairo reorganized their political activities,

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Kadi had been accused of the charge based on his distribution of a highly critical pamphlet that equated Ethiopian rule in Eritrea with “black colonialism.” See Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*, p. 131.

another group of activists, having fled from the Sahel to neighboring Sudan, established a base of operations at Port Sudan.²¹⁶ This group came under the leadership of Mohammed Said Nawud. Although he had had only limited experience in political affairs as a former member of the Sudanese Communist Party, Nawud earned the admiration of his followers, in part as a result of their reverence for Sudan's own nationalist victory in 1956. Nawud was initially accompanied by a small but devoted cadre of young and politically inexperienced Eritrean Muslims, including Saleh Ahmed Iyay, Yasin el-Gade, Mohammed el-Hassan, and Said Sabr, who utilized Port Sudan as a base of operations to gather funding, materials, and additional personnel.²¹⁷ By 1957, Nawud and his group of followers had formed the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM).²¹⁸

Originally known simply as *Harekat* ("movement" in Arabic), the ELM, much like the group of exiles based in Cairo, promoted the importance of unity within the independence struggle. However, The ELM went well beyond mere rhetoric by actively seeking to recruit both Muslim and Christian Eritrean nationalists to their cause. Despite being initially comprised exclusively of Muslim members, the ELM sought the redefinition of a politically distinct, pluralist, and ultimately secular Eritrean state.²¹⁹ The statutes of the ELM charter openly declared that Muslims and Christians were "brothers" in the struggle and that their unity would "[make] Eritrea one nation."²²⁰

²¹⁶ John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 106.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ E. Correnti. Interviewed by Joseph Venosa, July 2006. Some accounts differ on the precise year of the organization's formation, stating that the ELM was actually created in 1958. See John Markakis, "The Nationalist Revolution in Eritrea." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 26 (1988): p. 55.

²¹⁹ Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, p. 100.

²²⁰ Markakis, "The Nationalist Revolution in Eritrea," p. 55.

Eventually, the ELM's membership spread throughout Eritrea, garnering widespread support even among some in the highland Christian communities, particularly in and around Asmara, where the organization became known as the *Mahber Shew'ate* (Association of Seven) because of its members' strategy of operating in underground cells of seven people.²²¹ Unlike other nationalist organizations that developed later, the ELM was primarily devoted to "raising people's consciousness" of Eritrean independence, rather than simply organizing an armed resistance.²²² In fact, in its short-lived history, the organization's only well documented military initiative was a proposal by several ELM members to try to infiltrate the Ethiopian-dominated Eritrean police force and, according to John Markakis, "carry out a *coup d'etat* from within" rather than confront the regime with direct force.²²³ By 1960, the ELM had managed to secure enough broad support to call together its first congress in Asmara. Unfortunately, the ELM's concept of "Pan-Eritreanism" and its prevailing notions of Muslim-Christian cooperation had already begun to be compromised as a result of the efforts of Adem's faction in Cairo. With the assistance of Adem's colleague, Osman Sabbe, the more hard line Muslim nationalists began a gradual but effective campaign to thwart the efforts of the ELM.²²⁴

Although the ELM's idealistic membership had hoped to bring about a dramatic increase in Eritrean political activism and inter-religious unanimity, three obstacles

²²¹ Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, p. 100.

²²² Interview with E. Correnti. ELM operatives would utilize venues such as tea houses, bazaars, and even soccer matches to recruit prospective members. See Stefano Poscia, *Eritrea: Colonia Tradita* (Rome: Edizioni Associate, 1989), p. 70.

²²³ Markakis, "The Nationalist Revolution in Eritrea," p. 55.

²²⁴ Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, p. 103.

hampered the organization's agenda. First, there was the lack of a clearly defined strategy on the part of its relatively inexperienced members as to what avenue the organization should ultimately pursue in promoting Eritrean nationalism. While the ELM initially strove for a wider constituency through active campaigning, especially among Eritrean youth, some of its members were pulled toward a more aggressive agenda, with some ELM cohorts going as far as to plan an unsuccessful assassination attempt on the life of Keshi Dimetros, the Vice President of the Eritrean Assembly who had kept close ties with the Unionist faction and with Ethiopian security forces.²²⁵

Additionally, Nawud was in a relatively weak position as both the founder and principal organizer of the ELM, as many of his fellow nationalists viewed him as loyal to his past as an ardent communist and Marxist. This was especially alarming to the Cairo faction, whose most fervent critics of the ELM, including Idris Mohammad Adem, professed that Nawud and the ELM were being promoted by international communist forces as well as by "probable Ethiopian agents."²²⁶ This second point is especially important because of its understandably adverse effect on the ELM's operational abilities as a whole. The growing rift between the ELM and Adem's faction helped "expose the ELM to the attention of [Ethiopian] security offices."²²⁷ As a result several of the organization's members were arrested throughout 1961 and the ELM's cell structure was gradually dismantled as Ethiopian authorities concentrated on gaining information from

²²⁵ Ibid., p. 105. There is still considerable debate as to the true nature of the ELM. Some Eritreans interviewed during the course of this project have maintained that it was solely an unarmed, political organization while others have maintained that the ELM membership secured military training as well as arms during this period.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Markakis, *Nationalism in Conflict*, p. 108.

the “one member in each cell who was authorized to contact others.”²²⁸ Finally, the ELM’s declaration for religious unity was in many ways a self-fulfilling prophecy of disaster for the organization. By consciously seeking to involve the Christian highland communities, the ELM managed to effectively isolate many Muslims, particularly the politically experienced, exiled nationalists residing in Islamic countries other than Sudan and Egypt, such as Saudi Arabia and Somalia, who had come to believe that Eritrea’s Christian population had collectively adopted the policies of Haile Selassie and the Ethiopian Orthodox clergy.

Throughout the early 1960s the ELM found itself increasingly on the defensive against both Ethiopian authorities and Adem’s faction, which by 1961 had grown and transformed into a single cohesive organizational structure, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF).²²⁹ In early 1965, the ELM dispatched their first fully armed unit, a group of fifty men from Port Sudan, to enter the Sahel in Northern Eritrea. It was at a village called Ela Tsaeda that this force was subdued and disarmed by a unit of ELF fighters, striking a dramatic and ultimately lethal blow to the ELM and simultaneously establishing the ELF as the main opposition group against Ethiopian security forces.²³⁰

4.5 The Eritrean Liberation Front

Initially, the collection of Eritrean nationalists living in Cairo, the core of whom would become the ELF, was comprised of university students, veteran politicians in

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Interview with E. Correnti. Prior to helping found the ELF, Adem had been approached by representatives to join the ELM but had refused.

²³⁰ Interview with Saleh Qadi.

exile, and former fighters from the rural areas of Eritrea's western lowlands.²³¹ In 1960, Adem and Sultan visited Saudi Arabia and “made contacts with the Eritrean community,” after which they expressed their desire to “form an organization and start an armed struggle.”²³² Coalescing as the ELF in July of 1960, the organization, in sharp contrast to the ideology of the ELM, had a far less inclusive stance regarding the involvement of non-Muslims in their nationalist efforts. Under the primary leadership of Adem, who was aided by other former members of the Moslem League, including Sultan and Osman Sabbe, the ELF developed with the explicit goal of engaging in the struggle to overthrow both the unionist and Ethiopian forces in Eritrea.²³³ Also in contrast to the ELM was the ELF's initial makeup as an organization that operated externally from Eritrea itself, as the leadership formulated its initial strategy and technique from abroad.

This required a substantial organizational apparatus capable of successfully enlisting, transferring, and ultimately training recruits for the struggle. By 1960, the ELF was already making use of a previously utilized method for transporting willing nationalists from Eritrea for training abroad. David Poole has termed this clandestine system the “Khatmiyya Underground.”²³⁴ Originally designed in the late 1940s, the arrangement was a loosely defined network of secret checkpoints and safe houses in which Eritrean nationalists, often the target of Ethiopian authorities, were smuggled from

²³¹ Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, p. 109.

²³² Permanent Peoples' Tribunal, *The Eritrean case*, p. 151.

²³³ The one known exception to this rule was the ELF's relationship with nationalist icon Woldeab Woldemariam, who, although a native Tigrinya-speaker and a Christian, had cemented strong relationships with many leading Eritrean Muslim nationalists and, by the late 1950s, was active in transmitting radio programs from Egypt into Eritrea in an attempt to promote the cause. In later years, the ELF would begin to draw a steady amount of Christian members, although many still largely considered the organization a “Muslim” faction.

²³⁴ Poole, *From Guerillas to Government*, p. 48.

the Sahel in Northern Eritrea, through Sudan, and on to Cairo. The most active years of the underground, from the late-1950s until 1961, also saw a substantial increase in the overall number of ELF-affiliated Muslims seeking safe passage to Egypt; during this time the underground was supported particularly by the Khatmiyya brotherhood in Sudan as well as from the prominent Mirghani family.²³⁵ This enhancement in funding coincided with a noticeable shift in the exiled group's relationship with Islamic doctrine. Although by the early 1960s the membership had included a small number of Christians, the ELF leadership aligned itself increasingly with prominent Islamic figures, including Sayyidna Mustafa of the Add Shaykh, a Sufi brotherhood as well as Sayyid Ali Mirghani, who had served as the "spiritual head" of the Moslem League during the 1940s.²³⁶

The development of the loosely structured-Khatmiyya Underground and the related alliances with Islamic authorities was an important one for the ELF leadership in its quest to emerge as the primary opposition group against Ethiopian domination in Eritrea. It also revealed the intimacy between Muslim Eritreans and their brethren in Sudan; this proximity and camaraderie allowed for the growth and nourishment of the ELF during a period on which it had relatively little opportunity to develop its agenda from within Eritrea. Yet although they eagerly sought financial backers and facilitators in the Islamic world, the ELF leadership was careful not to identify itself as a purely Islamic organization during this period. There are a number of possible explanations as to why this occurred. The fact that the ELF was centered in Cairo during the mid-and

²³⁵ Ibid., 49. Allegedly, members of the ELM had approached both the Khatmiyya as well as the Mirghani for their assistance but were refused support because of their organization's perceived secular ideology.

²³⁶ Ibid., 48. According to Poole, in later years when the ranks of the ELF featured substantially more Christians, links between some of the more privileged rural elites from the highlands and the Orthodox Church were required to be broken.

late 1950s, a dramatic period of Arab nationalism under the leadership of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, may have certainly influenced their ideology to pursue a more secular path.²³⁷

Another explanation could have been the Eritreans' contact with another Arab nationalist organization, the FLN, whose own insurrection, against French occupation in North Africa, was well under way by the mid-1950s. Several members within the ELF had close contact with Abdelkarim Khattabi, a Moroccan exile who had accumulated combat experience when fighting against the French alongside the FLN.²³⁸ A third possible explanation for the ELF's reluctance to adopt a rigid Islamic ideology is the camaraderie that some ELF members still maintained with their exiled Christian comrades. Chief among these figures was Woldeab Woldemariam, whose writings as a political exile were to have a profound effect on Muslim and Christian Eritrean nationalists alike as the movement progressed.

4.6 “Arabizing” the ELF

Despite the initial promotion of a more secularized form of nationalism on the part of the ELF leadership, the international opponents to Eritrean independence largely characterized the movement as “Arab-instigated” almost from its inception.²³⁹ This was certainly the position adopted by Ethiopia's two principal allies at the time, the United

²³⁷ Ibid. The author also argues that the organization's links with “Pan-Arabism” could have been cemented simply by the fact that during this period the Egyptian capital had become a “Mecca for radical dissidents from Africa as well as from neighboring Arab countries.” See Poole, *From Guerillas to Government*, p. 110.

²³⁸ It has been suggested that the ELF's military organization was similar to the AFLN, as the organization eventually utilized a series of territorial/zonal divisions across Eritrea to carry out combat operations. See Paul B. Henze, “Eritrea,” in Michael Radu (ed.), *The New Insurgencies: Anticommunist Guerillas in the third world*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1990.

²³⁹ John Sorenson, “Discourses on Eritrean Nationalism and Identity,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 29 (1991): p. 307.

States and Israel. The United States, a supporter of Haile Sellasie's regime since the early 1930s, had become the principal supplier of financial and military aid to Ethiopia during the 1950s and 1960s. This aid, in the form of small and large arms, ammunition, planes, and tanks, was eventually used against the Eritrean resistance. Between 1953 and 1970, the United States provided \$147 million in military assistance to Haile Sellasie's government.²⁴⁰

For the Israelis, Ethiopia was perceived as one of the few remaining "islands in a Muslim sea." The establishment of an independent Eritrea, particularly one that was founded on Arab and Muslim-influenced principles, was seen as a direct threat to Israel's own security.²⁴¹ Israel's position was based in part on the erroneous assumption that Eritrea's population had a sizable Muslim majority. Specifically, Israeli authorities feared the prospect of an independent Eritrea enacting a blockade of the Bab el Mandab (one of the major geographical pinchpoints of the Red Sea area), thereby causing irreparable damage to the Israeli economy.²⁴² Consequently, Israel provided security training to Haile Sellasie's imperial guard in Addis Ababa, in addition to contributing sizeable numbers of Israeli commandos to augment Ethiopian forces within Eritrea. Asrate Kassa, governor-general of Eritrea during the early 60s, was accompanied by an Israeli military attaché.²⁴³ Echoing the Israeli position, Paul Henze, a former CIA official stationed in Addis Ababa during the late 1950s, proclaimed that "radical Arabs and

²⁴⁰ Richard Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980), p. 75.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning*, p. 96.

²⁴³ Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 75.

Communists” were the motivating forces in what he described as an “ephemeral and rootless Eritrean nationalism.”²⁴⁴

4.7 ELF in Context

By the early 1960s, the ELF had emerged as the organization most capable of leading the armed nationalist struggle. Not as idealistic as the ELM and free of that organization’s association with communist entities, the ELF built on the considerable political experience of its leadership, who utilized the strength of the Eritrean exile community in the Islamic world by entering in dialogue with their exiled brethren to help chart a course of action. This helped to forge a formidable independence faction would continue to dominate the course of the Eritrean nationalist movement until the beginning of the organization’s internal fracturing during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Of particular significance is the fact that the ELF promoted a rigidly nationalistic identity while embracing the traditional structures and authorities of Eritrea’s Islamic community. In balancing these disparate political identities, the ELF leadership was able to develop its operational administration as well as its military strategy in spite of the continuing abuses of the Ethiopian regime within Eritrea. Equally important was the ELF’s ability to draw upon the support of the largely disenfranchised Muslim communities from the rural areas of Northern Eritrea, where many Eritrean men had already experienced combat as part of the British-supported Eritrean Field Force or the SDF, both of which were used by the BMA during the 1940s in an attempt to try and

²⁴⁴ Sorenson, “Discourses on Eritrean Nationalism and Identity,” p. 307. For a more comprehensive analysis of this viewpoint, see Haggai Erlich, *The Struggle over Eritrea, 1962-1978* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983).

quell the actions of the Ethiopian backed shifta.²⁴⁵ Furthermore, the ELF, unlike the ELM, was able to establish an effective institutionalized structure to coordinate the nationalist agenda as the organization developed.

By 1962 the ELF had developed a managerial administration that went well beyond the accomplishments of anything achieved by the ELM. In that same year the ELF's Provisional Executive Committee consisting of Sultan, Adem, and Sabbe, was replaced by an expanded administrative entity, the Revolutionary Command (RC). The RC consisted of the former members of the *PRC* as well as a twelve-member Executive Committee made up of exiles in Sudan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.²⁴⁶ As the armed struggle progressed during the first half of the decade, the ELF and its most prominent figures, including Adem, Sabbe, Glawadewos and others, would establish the ELF and the paramount nationalist organization within Eritrea until the rise of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in the early 1970s.²⁴⁷

4.8 Commencement of the Armed Struggle

Although the leadership of both the ELM and ELF were preparing their respective organizations for the prospect of armed combat as the decade began, it was Hamid Idris Awate, an Eritrean outlaw not directly associated with either group, whose actions finally ignited armed hostilities against Ethiopia. On September 1st 1961, after fleeing into the Eritrean highlands as Ethiopian forces were rounding up suspected local activists, Awate led a band of ten men in a raid against an Ethiopian military outpost in the Barka

²⁴⁵ Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, p. 110.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

²⁴⁷ Idris O. Glawadewos was commissioned as Secretary entrusted with military affairs, providing a crucial role in the distribution of arms during the early struggle. Eventually he would become head of the Revolutionary Command itself, which was established at Kassala in 1965.

region.²⁴⁸ The attack marked the beginning of more than thirty years of continuous armed warfare against the Ethiopian state, a struggle often referred to as “Africa’s longest war.”²⁴⁹ Although Awate’s attack was not coordinated by the direct help of either the ELM or ELF, Adem nonetheless “endorsed Idris Awate’s declaration and decided to send him needed supplies.”²⁵⁰ Adem also sent Galadewos and his associate Sabbe to establish military operations in the western Eritrean lowlands following news of the attack. The ELF would later take credit for the attack, and even incorporate the majority of the remaining ELM fighters into their organization as armed tensions grew. The rise of the ELF’s military wing was met with varying degrees of enthusiasm across the Muslim world.

As Galadewos and Sabbe sought to acquire arms, they found receptive audiences in a number of other political factions across the Middle East. These groups included the Ba’ath Party, whose own principles of Arab-nationalism ran parallel to many of the ideals expressed by the ELF leadership. Although support was limited at first, the ELF received a substantial increase in arms shipments following the Baathists’ rise to power in Syria under General Amin el-Hafiz.²⁵¹ In diplomatic situations, Arabic speaking Eritreans within the ELF, including officials such as Ramadan Muhammed Nur and Muhammed Ali Umaru, used their linguistic and religious identities to help convince Syrian Baathists to further support Eritrea’s “Pan-Arab Cause.” In addition to providing considerable amounts of weaponry, many of the more sympathetic Syrian Baathists agreed to provide

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Awate himself had gained a reputation as a well known and formidable shifta who had fought against both BMA officials during the 1940s as well as against the Ethiopian presence in western Eritrea.

²⁵⁰ Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal, *The Eritrean Case*, p. 151.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

training camps within their territories for newly recruited ELF fighters.²⁵² It was also during this period that an influx of ELF recruits arrived from Sudan. These former soldiers, who were primarily defectors from the Sudanese army, also aided in securing additional amounts of arms from the Sudanese black market.²⁵³ And as Dan Connell writes, in addition to the help provided by Syria's Baathist regime and the sporadic assistance received from Sudan, the ELF received money, arms, and training from nations including Algeria and Iraq, and from revolutionary organizations such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Bahrain.²⁵⁴

4.9 Conclusions

The development of Eritrean nationalism among Muslim communities from the beginning of the Federation in 1952 until the actions of Awate and his band of fighters in 1961 demonstrates that there was never a singular, monolithic strategy regarding how independence should be achieved. Rather, it was approached and debated between a variety of different factions within Eritrean society, including politicians, university students, religious figures, and former soldiers, many of whom, as exiles, operated on the periphery of Eritrean politics. These differences in approach are perhaps best exemplified by the political platforms of the ELM and the ELF developed during the late 1950s and early 60s. For the supporters of the ELM, their organization stood as an

²⁵² Michela Wrong, *I Didn't Do it for You* (Trenton: The Red Sea Press), p. 177.

²⁵³ Foreign Office. 371/183840, VA 1015/17, British Embassy, Addis Ababa, 14/4/65.

²⁵⁴ Dan Connell, *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Trenton: The Red Sea Press Inc., 1993), p. 78.

important social and political entity that attempted to reach out to all Eritreans while promoting the nationalist cause through the use of a generally non-violent agenda.²⁵⁵

Those aligned with the agenda of the ELF also sought the achievement of an Eritrean state free from the influence and domination of the Ethiopian regime, yet they pursued decidedly more aggressive policies in bringing their movement into fruition. Members recruited largely from communities with historically close ties with Sufi brotherhoods in both Eritrea and eastern Sudan understandably sought to strengthen their cause through the religious unity of Islam. As such, they were suspicious of including any sizable numbers of Christian Eritreans in the movement because of the fear that they could not be trusted. ELF leaders were far less averse to the possibility of armed combat than were their counterparts in the ELM, and they pursued any and all practical means of assistance. This included the welcomed support of many Islamic countries throughout the Middle East, whose association with the ELF, however distant, allowed the Ethiopian regime and its allies to label the ELF as a militant, Islamic fundamentalist movement that had its roots outside of Eritrea. Unfortunately, both the ELM and ELF spent a considerable amount of their time and resources against each other rather than uniting against their common adversary. In the words of one Eritrean, “they could have worked together for their objective either through coordination or through merger. Unluckily, they were made to cross swords through the machinations of superior power and forces that cared only for their strategic interests.”²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵ Interview with Bohashem Bohashem.

²⁵⁶ Interview with E. Correnti.

Regardless of their similarities and differences as nationalist organizations, both the ELM and the ELF were largely the result of a gradual and brutal execution on the part of Ethiopia that sought nothing less than the total subjugation of Eritrea under the control of Haile Selassie. Toward this end, the Ethiopian government successfully employed a variety of statutes that helped to ostracize and alienate Eritrea's Muslim community while at the same time, removing any vestiges of Eritrean sovereignty. Breaking with the vulnerable stipulations of UN Resolution 390-A, Ethiopia was able, in less than a decade, to effectively dismantle the autonomy promised to Eritrea by the United Nations.

Ironically, Ethiopia's aggression proved to be a major source of inspiration for politically conscious Muslims, who saw members of their spiritual and political leadership imprisoned, their language forbidden, and their religion subjected to the authority of a monarchy that openly declared its allegiance to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. This progression of events imparted to many Muslims -particularly those living within the lowlands of western Eritrea- a sense of urgency that would manifest in their dedicated opposition to the Ethiopian government and its unionist allies in Eritrea. It was in this environment that members of Eritrea's nationalist intelligentsia, largely exiled, managed to employ their considerable experience as political organizers and facilitators to develop a cohesive nationalist identity thoroughly committed to the idea that, above all else, Eritrea must be freed from Ethiopian colonial oppression.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 The Struggle Post-1961

In the aftermath of the actions of Awate and his group of fighters, the Ethiopian government committed itself to the total annihilation of all remaining notions of Eritrean autonomy. In November of 1962, Haile Selassie achieved his long held goal of dissolving the Federation. Ironically, its dissolution came by means of a “vote” by members of the Eritrean assembly. After a campaign in which Eritrean representatives were either bribed or intimidated into voting in favor of dissolving the Federation, the motion to annex Eritrea with Ethiopia was passed on November 15th. Yet even in the face of defeat, some of the Muslim representatives remained resolute in their willingness to retain Eritrea’s independence. Some members of the assembly, including Muhammed Omar Akito, refused even to vote on the matter.²⁵⁷ Finally, under the physical pressure of the Eritrean police, who had surrounded the Assembly building with the assistance of the Ethiopian Second Division under the command of General Abbiye Abebe, the Federation’s abolition was officially proclaimed by Haile Selassie through Order No. 27, terminating Eritrea’s federal status.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning*, 73. See also Kassim Shehim, “Ethiopia, Revolution and the Question of Nationalities: The Case of the Afar,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 23 (1985), p. 338.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.* There is still some controversy on whether or not an official vote to liquidate the Federation ever took place. Some accounts, including the testimony of Tekie Fessehazion in “The International Demensions,” state that a vote was held within the assembly four times but was defeated nonetheless. According to Richard Johnson, the American Consul in Asmara, the “unification’ was prepared and perpetuated from above in the maximum secrecy without the slightest public debate or discussion.” See also Bereket Habte Selassie, *Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980).

Although 1962 saw both the end of the Federation as well as the death of Awate himself, the ELF continued to gain new recruits for their armed guerilla campaign.²⁵⁹ The ELF was able to gain the support of new recruits from a variety of social and economic backgrounds, including formally exiled students and workers from Egypt and Sudan who wished to take up arms. Despite the influx of these exiles, a significant proportion of the fighters within the ELF were drawn from the rural and nomadic Muslim communities of the western lowlands.²⁶⁰ Because the early ELF cadres remained a predominantly nomad and semi-nomad force, the ELF was directly influenced into pursuing a guerilla style method of fighting that utilized the traditional techniques of nomad raiding that had long been practiced among Muslim lowlanders.²⁶¹

During the period from 1960 until 1968, the ELF claimed that it had killed more than 5,000 Ethiopian soldiers and that it had liberated approximately two thirds of the overall territory in Eritrea.²⁶² Through their underground tactics, ELF fighters were able to carry out attacks on Ethiopian military installations throughout the region even while they engaged in fighting against those Eritreans who had still pledged their allegiance to the ELM. By August of 1967, more than 2000 fully trained fighters were estimated to be under the authority of the ELF.²⁶³ Despite these developments, the ELF gradually succumbed to internal fighting and eventual fracturing as the decade progressed.

According to Iyob, the ELF's affiliation with the Arab world "exacerbated religious and

²⁵⁹ Awate is alleged to have died as a result of food poisoning in mid-1962.

²⁶⁰ Permanent People's Tribunal, *The Eritrean Case*, p. 151.

²⁶¹ Michael and Trish Johnson, *Eritrea: The National Question and the Logic of Protracted Struggle*, 187.

²⁶² Robert Machida, *Eritrea: The Struggle for Independence* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1987), 40. See also, Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning*, p. 118.

²⁶³ Christopher Clapham, "Ethiopia and Somalia," In *Conflicts in Africa* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1972), p. 10.

ethnic hostilities. The ascendancy of Moslem militants in the ELF leadership and the discrimination against Christian fighters led to an organizational crisis” that ultimately helped spawn a second armed independence organization at the end of the decade, the secular Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF).²⁶⁴ For the next dozen years “bitter rivalry and enmity prevailed between the two fronts” as countless battles raged for control of Eritrean cities and villages.²⁶⁵ Following the defeat of the remaining ELF forces in 1981, the remnants of the organization were pushed completely out of Eritrea. The victory allowed the EPLF to consolidate their authority within the independence struggle against Ethiopia for the remainder of the war, significantly limiting the influence and authority of many of the more hard-line Muslims who had believed that Eritrea could only be led to independence through a rigidly Islamic leadership.

5.2 Final Conclusions

This project has attempted to explain both how and why the Eritrean struggle for independence was largely developed in the confines of Eritrea’s Muslim communities from the period of British trusteeship through the ill-fated Federation with Ethiopia. Throughout the period, Eritrean Muslims played an especially important role in initiating and facilitating the earliest organized resistance movements to oppose the threat of external domination. Beginning in the period of British Trusteeship, Muslims were deeply influenced by the attempts of the BMA and the Ethiopian monarchy in creating social friction between the predominantly Christian Eritreans of the Highlands and Muslim lowlanders. In response to these divisive tactics, some of the Eritrea’s most

²⁶⁴ Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*, p. 108.

²⁶⁵ Tafla, “Eritrea: Remote Past and Present,” p. 94.

prominent spiritual and economic figures helped create a political consortium, the Moslem League, to help safeguard the interests of Eritrean Muslims. The founders of the League, including figures such as Ibrahim Sultan, Idris Muhammed Adem, Shief Abdel Keber, and related individuals such as Sheik Ibrahim Al-Mukhtar Ahmed Omar, attempted to bring the plight of the general Eritrean citizenry by petitioning for a redress of their grievances on the part of the international community, specifically, the United Nations General Assembly.

Adding to their difficulty was the increase in shifta activity, which as a result of considerable influence on the part of the Ethiopian administration within Eritrea both before and during the Federation's existence, created a situation in which Eritrean society was threatened with social upheaval. Because the shifta concentrated the majority of their attacks on Eritrean Muslims who would not support the Union of Eritrea with Ethiopia, some of the leading nationalist leaders within Muslim communities found themselves the target of harassment as well as physical altercations. The inability of the BMA (which often bordered on negligence) to protect Eritreans from the Ethiopian-backed shifta only helped to gain increased support for organizations such as the Moslem League, NMPM, NEPIP, and others that stood up against the hostile climate of social and political injustice.

The international community's failure to fully appreciate and deal with the oppression of Eritrea at the hands of the successive British and Ethiopian regimes ultimately forced many Muslim political leaders to flee their homeland and form a revitalized nationalist movement from throughout the Middle East. The growth of these

exile communities in Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and other locations ultimately provided the movement with an opportunity to carry out an independence movement that was conscious of the importance of Islam among its primary members. However, the testimony that has been provided within this essay has also demonstrated that the “Islamic character” of a significant majority of Eritrean nationalists was less of an intrinsic phenomenon and more the result of a practical realization by the nationalist leadership that broad support could only be achieved if their factions emphasized their struggle with a decidedly religious component. That being said, it is also unequivocally clear that many Eritrean nationalists were aided by contacts among some of the more influential Sufi brotherhoods residing in both Sudan and Egypt, who used their power and influence to help smuggle the predominantly Muslim Eritrean nationalists from Eritrea for their training abroad.

Equally important however is the admission that among many nationalists, there was a divide in ideology over whether or not the mostly Christian highlanders of Eritrea should be included in the struggle. The development of the ELM and ELF can be viewed as the political manifestation of these two competing viewpoints. Both organizations made efforts to win increased support for their respective agendas, and ultimately it was the ELF leadership, less sympathetic towards including non-Muslims in the struggle and more proactive in terms of promoting direct military action, that ultimately came to dominate the independence struggle.

The growth of this nationalist sentiment could not have occurred in absence of the blatantly oppressive policies taken by the Ethiopian government during the existence of

the Ethiopian-Eritrean Federation from 1952 to 1962. In its short lifespan, the Federation transformed Eritrea from a semi-independent state into a de facto colony of Ethiopia. The series of successive laws that were implemented to restrict Eritrea's political and social autonomy had a profound influence on Muslims, who were particularly influenced as a result of being denied employment and educational opportunities in favor of Eritrean Christians, the majority of whom were initially in favor of union with Ethiopia.

Ultimately however, the story of Eritrean Muslims and their role in the early nationalist struggle is a chronicle of how a substantial portion of Eritrean society evolved into an influential political force as a result of extreme social and political disenfranchisement. In a situation where the vast majority of Eritrean Muslims found their communities threatened by the policies and aims of the Ethiopian government, where many witnessed their friends and relatives being imprisoned on baseless charges, and where their language and culture was systematically demolished through unwarranted laws, Eritreans came of age in an atmosphere of ever-present tension and injustice. As one Eritrean has commented, "the concept of injustice, the concept of oppression, although abstract, was what we experienced growing up. It became ingrained."²⁶⁶

5.3 A Direction Forward

For those scholars seeking to engage in future studies of this era of Eritrean history, it is important to note that there remains a considerable need to examine non-traditional sources as part of the research process. While a substantial amount of investigation has been conducted through countless books, journal articles, and published

²⁶⁶ Interview with Khalid Beshir.

interviews with Eritrean officials and veterans of the armed struggle, there has been a surprising dearth of information retrieved from many of the Islamic nations that significantly aided the early formation of organizations such as the ELM and ELF. It would behoove researchers to examine more closely the official records of countries including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Yemen and others in order to ascertain their respective degree of involvement in aiding exiled Eritrean nationalists. While some texts such as Osman Sabbe's *Judhur al-Khilagat al-Iritiriyya wa Turuq Ma'lajtiha* and T. H. Faddab's *Harakat al-Tahir Iritriya wa Masiratihya al-Tarihkiyya* have provided researchers with a considerable degree of knowledge regarding how these exiled factions operated within their adopted countries, they generally fall short of enlightening investigators as to how the governments throughout the Middle East specifically aided the exiles with regards to combat training and/or issues related to funding.

Equally vital to this investigation is the need for an increased amount of qualitative research from among those Eritreans who can provide the most valuable personal narratives of the events in question. While this paper has utilized the knowledge and experience of some Eritrean Muslims familiar with the issues at hand, there undoubtedly needs to be a more comprehensive coalescence of first-hand accounts by other residents of Muslim communities who lived through the period between British trusteeship and the dissolution of the Federation. Unfortunately, with the passage of time as well as with the increased difficulty in gaining adequate research access within present-day Eritrea, these investigative avenues present tremendous difficulties for researchers.

However, prospective historians should take encouragement from the fact that there exists a rich variety of testimony that is to be found among the scattered communities of Eritrean Muslims residing throughout the world in as Italy, The Netherlands, Great Britain, Australia, Canada, the United States, Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia, and elsewhere. Only through a more intensive effort to approach those surviving witnesses willing to discuss the matter will there be any degree of notable progress in further assessing the social, political, and cultural importance of Eritrea's Muslim community in both defining and organizing the initial nationalist movement in Eritrea, a movement that was ultimately the basis for one of most elongated and hard fought independence struggles in post-colonial Africa.

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