



Making Tribes: Social Engineering in the Western Province of British-Administered

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Making Tribes: Social Engineering in the Western Province of British-Administered Eritrea, 1941-1952

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In light of the results of this investigation, the administration proceeded to reorganize the tribal structure in the Nacfa and Agordat districts. It was first ascertained which groups seemed by virtue of their size to merit independent tribal status after an initial period to allow voluntary amalgamations. Second, arrangements were made to encourage voluntary amalgamations of the smaller groups. As a result 20 wholly new tribes comprising a total population of 147,164 have emerged as independent units, 8 former nonaristocratic tribes (total population, 32,899) have been refashioned, and the former aristocratic tribes have been recast in light of their reduced population. Twenty chiefs and 591 subordinate chiefs have been elected, mainly by unanimous vote.

1. For many years now it has been accepted within academic circles that tribes and ethnicities are made and that traditions can be similarly made, invented, and imagined.¹ Consequently, most historians dealing with Africa have come to include the obligatory paragraph referring to the literature, which notes that ethnicity, identity, and the like are fluid, malleable, and subject to historical change. The study of these issues and developments has been particularly apparent in southern and eastern Africa.² Eritrea, a country that has just fought an extremely costly war,

which some would argue was fought because of differing national attitudes toward ethnicity,³ is home to people with a large number of differing ethnicities, religious beliefs, and identities.⁴ Unfortunately, unlike in neighboring Ethiopia, no recent historical research on ethnicity has been conducted or published in Eritrea.⁵ Such research seems to be sorely needed, given that Eritrea is currently attempting to forge national unity out of a multitude of diverse ethnicities.⁶

2. Successive regimes have sought to remodel the ethnic landscape of Eritrea in accordance with their varied wishes.⁷ This article deals with ethnic change in the Western Province of Eritrea during the period of British colonial administration. In this part of the country, the British administration, in an effort to curb banditry and social unrest, completely changed the manner in which people had access to power. To do this the British divested several political structures of legitimacy and invested others with state-sanctioned legitimacy. Some precolonial forms of governance were canceled, new forms were created, and some forms with alleged historical antecedence were invested with new legitimacy. In doing this, the British administration changed forever the society in the Western Province.

British Authority

3. On January 5, 1941, British administrative authority was proclaimed in Eritrea. The colonial armies of fascist Italy had been defeated in Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. Henceforth, men drawn from the various branches and arms of the British Empire's overstretched armed forces and colonial administrations were to administer Eritrea. They were faced with a daunting task. Over 60,000 Eritrean *askari* (colonial soldiers) had participated in the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Before 1941 an estimated 40% of the Eritrean male labor force had been recruited into the Italian army as *askari*. Tekeste Negash remarked of the period 1935-41, "from the few studies available on the economy of the peasantry, recruitment to the colonial army appeared to have caused the virtual collapse of the subsistence economy."⁸ With the defeat of the Italian armies, no fewer than 50,000 Eritrean *askari* were demobilized. These men returned to a land ravaged by war, strewn with ordinance, and with little hope of economic development.
4. It is true that, because of allied wartime industries, there was an economic boom in the highland areas of Eritrea, but this did not extend

to the western province.⁹ Instead, from 1942 onward, armed bands of *Shifta* (bandits) began operating on an ever-increasing scale.¹⁰ Initially, the *Shifta* operated solely as bandits, but they soon extended their enterprise beyond extortion and robbery to include taking on operations as guns for hire. *Shifta* bands came to be recruited by villages and pastoral bands to eliminate or drive off competing claimants to land and resources.¹¹ The annual reports of the British administration mention the adverse effects of *Shifta* activity in virtually all spheres of life. Railways, hunting, agriculture, veterinary services, mining and quarrying, health care, and much more were affected by *Shifta* activity. As one of the annual reports wryly noted of the fishing industry, "The industry enjoyed a profitable year as it seems to be the only open-air activity not interfered with by *shifta*."¹²

5. The British administration believed that the unrest and trouble being experienced in the western province was due to several factors, the principle one being the destruction of effective structures of control. In addition, the western province was characterized by echoes of what they had seen—and believed solved through partition—in India, except that, in their eyes, the conflict in Eritrea was not between Muslims and Hindus, but between Muslims and Christians:

6. "The division between Tigrinya speaking Christian Copts and Tigre and Arabic speaking Moslems is marked, but the recent movement against any partition of Eritrea militates against a seemingly easy solution of dividing the territory on racial and religious lines."¹³

The Western Province

7. The area that made up the western province of Eritrea under British military administration was populated by successive waves of people who through time had been subject to a series of varying authorities.¹⁴ The area had been in long contact with the ancient civilisations of Egypt and Yemen. Beginning in the first century B.C./A.D., the famous kingdom of Aksum rose to power. Though the extent of the Aksumite Empire has not been defined, it is clear that by the later third century A. D. all of what would later become the Western Province had fallen under the jurisdiction of Aksum.¹⁵ In the sixth century A.D., Aksumite control over the territory began slipping as the empire began to disintegrate.

After the Arabian invasion of Egypt and the expansion of Islam, the territory came to be contested between the highland Christian kingdoms of Ethiopia and the Muslim realms that developed along the Red Sea.

8. The British administration argued that, before Italian colonialism, the Tigre population of the western province had come to be dominated by people who had moved into the area in the 16th and 17th centuries and were later nominated by the Ethiopian emperors to administer the territory. ¹⁶ It was as a consequence of these migrations that, in the words of a British administrator, "the complete destruction of the former Tigre tribal units,... [and their absorption] into the tribal organisation of the new comers" had occurred. ¹⁷ The process of alleged absorption was described as being "untidy" in that "the individual components of a Tigre tribal, clan, or family group were seldom entirely absorbed by one of the immigrant tribes since they had become so widely scattered that those who had formerly been members of the same Tigre tribe, clan, family, or sometimes even household often found themselves distributed about a number of different tribal organisations." ¹⁸ Even so, from this process there developed a "wholly new type of tribal unit" that consisted of a dominant and a subject class. The dominant class "was made up of supposed kinsmen subdividing genealogically into clans and families after the orthodox kinship pattern, while the subject class comprised a mass of individuals derived from a variety of Tigre tribal groups, clans, and families seldom having any kinship with each other." ¹⁹ In other words, according to the British, powerful immigrant communities had divided the Tigre resident in the area among themselves:

9. "And as for the 'Tigre,' as the members of the subject class were now generally described, they were haphazardly parcelled out among these tribal sections [new tribal units] at the will of their rulers." ²⁰

10. In this scheme of things, the dominant class, or aristocrats, were referred to as *Shumagulle*. ²¹ The *Shumagulle* and the Tigre were supposed to have operated in a feudal system of duties, rights, and privileges, "whereby the *Shumagulle* directed the affairs of the community and provided it with protection, while for their part the Tigre furnished the *Shumagulle* with a variety of feudal dues and services and attended to the domestic requirements of the community as a whole." ²²

The Effects of Italian Colonial Rule

11. As with the imposition of colonial rule elsewhere in Africa, the coming of Italian colonial rule changed the social relations that had hitherto existed in the areas that would become the western province. British administrators assigned to the western province argued that the incoming Italian colonial administration had usurped the customary protective role of the *Shumagulle*. In the words of a British administrator, "The Italian Government at once cut at the roots of Shumagulle authority by rendering the implicit contract which had hitherto determined Shumagulle-Tigre relations meaningless." ²³ Undoubtedly, the coming of Italian colonialism threatened the role, position, and function of traditional leadership in much the same way as had occurred elsewhere in Africa. The coming of Italian colonialism provided people living in the western province with access to forms of power and appeal outside the realm of the traditional authorities and beyond their control. That this was the case is clearly shown in the words of Tigre spokesmen in a letter addressed to Italian colonial commissioner of Keren Fioccardi around 1917:
 12. "Since the Italian Government administer our country [*sic*], we feel safer in our houses: the high class people have reduced their demands and do not molest our women." ²⁴
13. Henceforth, as each party struggled to discover how best to couch and formulate their respective demands vis-à-vis the new colonial state, many made use of the state of fluidity to escape from unwanted social contracts or at the very least to reformulate these in their own interests. In the words of Italian settler representatives in 1947:
 14. "When the Italian occupation took place, the first preoccupation of the Government was to eliminate those forms of subjection which might savour of slavery. ... The Italian Government also abolished gradually the tributes imposed on Tigre by its lords, by reducing them as much as was consistent with maintaining the tribal and sub-tribal chiefs in the administrative positions of authority, without which the tribes themselves might have subsided into complete anarchy with inevitable danger to public security." ²⁵

15. Nevertheless, however gradually the Italians may have hoped to have transformed what they seem to have seen as a static society, the societies with which they were dealing transformed in unanticipated ways as people living within them sought to make the best of the social relations changed by Italian colonial rule. Perhaps one of the biggest changes brought about by the coming of Italian colonialism was that it became possible for people to travel far and wide through the newly created colonial territory in search of employment and a means of living beyond the control of traditional leadership. No longer needing to depend on the protection of feudal lords, peasants could seek their fortune elsewhere; consequently, people dispersed throughout Eritrea. As British officials noted:

16. "Thus tribal units which had once lived within recognised territorial areas tended to shoot out fragments and splinters in several directions. For example Habab who had traditionally lived within the Northern hills and the Northern reaches of the coastal plane threw off fragments which settled as far afield as Sabderat [*sic*] on the Sudan frontier and the plain of Ala near the modern township of Decamere [*sic*] in the south." ²⁶

17. Needless to say, with their former subjects scattered far and wide and under the authority and protection of the new colonial administration, there was little that traditional leadership could do to enforce their wishes. Consequently, they, too, sought to come to a form of agreement with the colonial administration which would suit their mutual interests:

18. "The effect of Italian rule was to reduce the relationship between Shumagulle and Tigre to occasional encounters during which the Shumagulle levied tribute and feudal dues or demanded customary services from the Tigre. ... But under the veneer an astute observer would have noticed that as a class the Shumagulle were becoming increasingly feeble and decadent, that the Tigre were growing stronger and more resentful at their treatment, and that whereas tribal chiefs had formerly derived their authority from the military strength of the Shumagulle they now owed their positions solely to the physical support of the Italian Government." ²⁷

The British Military Administration

19. The introduction of British military administration in the area was characterized by "the most insistent protests from the Tigre of the Keren and Nacfa districts against the payment of feudal dues and the performance of customary services."²⁸ In what was later described as a rash and hasty decision, the new British military administration announced that it would not enforce the payment of feudal dues or the performance of customary services.²⁹ As a consequence, by 1943 "mass disobedience and the increasing demands of tribal chiefs for the Administration's physical support of their authority, left no doubt that unless some action was taken there was every danger of the existing tribal system collapsing and anarchy prevailing throughout the districts of Keren and Nacfa."³⁰ In an effort to stabilize the situation, the British administration attempted to reverse its earlier decisions and to seek to reestablish the position of the "existing tribal system." Consequently, "stern measures were taken against Tigre ringleaders," a number of whom were arrested and banished to the port city of Assab in the extreme eastern region of the territory. In addition, what was termed as "energetic physical support" was extended to tribal chiefs to enable them reassert their authority over "Tigre recalcitrants." Furthermore, it was decreed that some "Tigre tribes" would have to pay dues on cultivated land as a form of land rent to the *Shumagulle*.³¹
20. With characteristic British understatement, it was noted that "the effect of these measures was not wholly satisfactory."³² Understatement, particularly when one considers that the measures seem to have resulted in the refusal by Tigre to engage in cultivation. Indeed, "extensive areas on the Anseba were left fallow by Tigre who preferred to go without grain to paying dues to the *Shumagulle*."³³ Instead, as was to be expected, many of those who had previously tilled the fields now engaged in banditry as *Shiftas*. Writing on the development of *Shifta* activity in 1941-50, British administrator Kennedy Trevaskis noted a flare-up of *Shifta* activity in the western province in 1943. This increased to such an extent in the following year that the police, "proving incapable of handling the situation, were assisted on a large scale by Sudanese troops."³⁴ By 1946 it had become apparent to the administration that the measures introduced in 1943 had failed and that "the existing tribal system was as near to collapse as it had ever been."³⁵
21. In effect, the administration had set out to solve the problem of relations between Tigre and *Shumagulle* through a compromise, whereby

the tribal framework, which they believed existed, would have been preserved while social and economic equality could have been introduced within it. Ruefully, it was noted that the policy had had only the "slenderest chance of success," for "the mixed social elements which comprised the traditional tribal units had only been held together in the past by the unquestioned political, social, and economic supremacy of the Shumagulle within them." ³⁶ Shorn of their privileges by successive colonial regimes, the *Shumagulle* were no longer in a position to exercise effective political control. Similarly, the Tigre were in no mood to allow the reintroduction of conditions which they felt were akin to slavery. ³⁷ Social relations in the western province became extremely heated, with Tigre spokesmen deploying language that displayed extreme prejudice and little subtlety. Thus, a submission by "Tigre Representatives" estimated that 500,000 Tigreans "suffer conditions of continuous slavery under the rule of about 1000 parasites." ³⁸ Clearly, this was an exaggeration. However, action needed to be taken, as a British administrator noted:

22. "The position continued to deteriorate and it became increasingly clear that unless some alternative tribal system were devised within which the Tigre could find freedom from Shumagulle control, they would ultimately find it in the anarchy which was already developing with the disintegration of the existing tribal structures." ³⁹

Seeking an Alternative

23. But how was the British administration to devise an alternative system? Very little effective information was available on the precolonial period. Italian records made references to various groups of people that had allegedly existed, "but they invariably suggested that all trace of these tribes and their descendants had disappeared with their absorption by the Shumagulle groups." ⁴⁰ The British administrators were invariably dependent for their information on colonial Italian administrators whose services had been retained by the British. Overstretched as it was, the new administration had little opportunity to gain detailed on-the-ground knowledge of what was going on in the districts of the western province. Faced with continual fuel shortages, transport difficulties, and new and unknown territories, languages, and people, as well as the ever-present danger of *shifita* activity, it is hardly surprising that at times the British officials had little insight into social developments in the western

province.⁴¹ A delegation from the war office, in commenting on administration in Eritrea, unintentionally highlighted the troubled nature of the region when it commented:

24. "At present Eritrea appears to be a country controlled by police action rather than one administered through its indigenous organisations. Especially is this the case in the Western Province where there are no less than nine hundred police. We feel that an experienced Civil Affairs Officer, with perhaps a native assistant or two, drawn from the Sudan, could have asserted a more natural authority over the tribes, thus enabling a large reduction of police to be made in this area."⁴²

25. The British authorities were aware that simply continuing to increase troop and police deployment could not compensate for the lack of insight into what was happening on the ground. It was necessary that insight for social reorganization had to be gained, particularly when one considers that in 1945 an experienced anthropologist such as S.F. Nadel,⁴³ who had been in charge of the Agordat division, could write:

26. "There remains the sociologically significant fact that the serfs (i.e. Tigre) are all classed together under a name denoting a whole race or language group. Their descent even if known can be ignored; they are people of no pedigree; they simply exist as do languages and alien races."⁴⁴

Rediscovering Tigre Tribes

27. *Remedial measures which could be attempted within the existing tribal framework having failed, the administration approached the problem anew by trying to discover what recognised Tigre groups existed, what was their relationship and into what form of tribal pattern they could be fitted. It was decided that the solution lay in the re-organisation of society in terms of its supposed genealogical descent and the kinship believed to exist between the various social groups.*⁴⁵

28. Seeking to come to terms with a bewildering array of names,

alliances, and relationships and aware that something had to be done, even if it was in the face of Nadel's words, district officials in the western province sought to discover order in chaos. Order, they believed, was to be found by rediscovering Tigre descent. Officials began to make enquiries:

29. "with the immediate object of discovering what recognised Tigre groups existed, what ties if any existed as between them and into what form of tribal pattern they could be fitted if necessity so demand."⁴⁶

30. Officially it was claimed that these enquiries were pursued discreetly. In the increasingly politicized atmosphere of the time, in which there was much uncertainty as to the future of Eritrea, these investigations, for all the good intentions of the officials, could not have been carried out discreetly.⁴⁷ In an atmosphere in which various interest groups were jockeying with one another for influence and power, any enquiry relating to descent, relations, and rights automatically became an enquiry relating to power, and thus extremely subjective.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the enquiries carried out provided information that seemed to suggest that, within the societies of the western province, "there lay the shadow of the old Tigre tribes which divided society in a perpendicular sense on the basis of kinship and genealogy."⁴⁹ Not surprisingly, having discovered the "shadow," the colonial administration was also soon to discover that the "individual Tigre were not only conscious of belonging to particular Tigre tribes," but also as to the position they occupied within these tribes.⁵⁰ British government investigations into what, why, and who constituted part and parcel of which "tribe" must have had a tremendous effect on the manner in which politics came to be articulated at the time in the western province. In effect, the British not only provided, but also actively encouraged, an opportunity to provide views of history and society in keeping with what various Tigreans believed to be correct, just, and desirable. In these highly fluid conditions, views of the past and present, not surprisingly, clashed. To some extent these clashes are reflected in the varying petitions submitted by the various parties to the Four Power Commission of Investigation for the Former Italian Colonies when it visited Eritrea in 1947.⁵¹ This visit, all observers noted with some surprise, did much to heighten the politicization already present in the territory.⁵²

31. **Four Powers Commission**

32. On the basis of initial enquiries, it came to be suggested that the only practicable alternative to the existing "tribal system would lie in the reorganisation of society in terms of its supposed genealogical descent and the kinship believed to exist between the different social groups." ⁵³ However, it was also obvious to the administration that, though initial research hinted at factors that could form the basis for social reorganization, without detailed research the basis upon which this envisaged reorganization would have to be based would remain unobtainable. The upcoming visit of the Four Power Commission to Eritrea was used by the British as an opportunity in which "to obtain the facts." ⁵⁴ Deciding that the commission would wish to meet with democratically elected representatives of the various population groups of Eritrea, the British administrators decided that representatives would be elected from within predetermined kinship groups. How the British administrators decided upon what the various kinship groups were and who would be eligible to vote within these groups was not discussed. These elections were probably conducted on the basis of kinship structures as defined and believed to be in existence by the British after their initial investigations. That is, through the holding of "democratic elections" in predetermined groups, selected on the basis of undisclosed criteria, the British used the coming of the Four Powers Commission to legitimate, establish, and strengthen the groups selected. The words of colonial officials dealing with the issue at the time clearly convey the manner in which this process took place:

33. "It was anticipated-correctly as it turned out-that the Four Power Commission would wish to hear the views of the representatives from each tribe. Traditionally, the chiefs and Shumagulle were the political representatives of their tribes, but in practice they were wholly unrepresentative of and unacceptable as representatives to the Tigre. There was little doubt that if the administration had attempted to introduce the chiefs and Shumagulle to the Four Power Commission as genuine representatives of tribal opinion it would have courted the most serious criticism. It was for this reason that it was decided that each Tigre kinship group within one of the existing tribes might elect a representative, while the Shumagulle kinship groups would be represented separately. The elections were made at tribal meetings under the supervision of district officers and the results were registered by them. The register of results included approximate population

figures which were in each case given on oath by the elected representatives." ⁵⁵

34. In a circular process, the British used the coming of the Four Powers Commission to underscore that which they had already conceived, where after they could claim merely to have reinstated that which had existed before, albeit in a shadow form.

Transforming Society

35. After the departure of the Four Powers Commission in early 1948, British administrators in the western province noted that "it could be said that traditional tribal government had completely collapsed." ⁵⁶ This was hardly surprising, given that the administration, by its own admission, had spent a lot of time and effort to discover and invest new forms of social organization with some form of legitimacy, a legitimacy and order that directly contradicted the forms of social organization that had existed beforehand. Having divested the formal forms of social organization of any form of continued legitimacy, the administration decided that the "only practicable solution to the problem lay in the resurrection of the former Tigre tribes through the reorganisation of society in terms of its supposed genealogy and kinship." ⁵⁷ By June 1948—less than three months after the departure of the Four Powers Commission—the acting chief administrator of Eritrea granted permission to begin the work of "tribal reorganisation":

36. "The purpose of this work was to discover how the inhabitants ° wished to be reorganised, and subject to reasonable administrative desiderata to reorganise them according to their wishes." ⁵⁸

37. Having decided that the solution to the problems being experienced lay in the reorganization of society into discreet tribes, the administration's most pressing problem was to persuade the large number of small families seeking independent "tribal status" to enter into "tribal groups" of reasonable size. ⁵⁹ For the most part each one of the various groups, discovered by the British administrators in the run-up to the Four Power Commission visit, sought independent tribal status on a par with other groups. In other words, the British found themselves faced by a bewildering array of groups all seeking equal status as "tribes" recognized by the administration. Much like the sorcerer's apprentice, the

British had created an opportunity in society which had allowed people to seek to reorganize and reformulate society. However, the British now had to find ways to control these new developments so that this new dispensation could become workable. The first step in this process was to try to consolidate the myriad of small units into workable units:

38. "For the most part each ... [sought] independent tribal status; and although some information was available as to supposed kinship said to exist between some of these family groups, the information was not always reliable. Clearly it was more desirable that these small units should amalgamate into associations of their own choice than that they should be compelled to enter organisations created by the administration on the basis of the inadequate information available to it. For this reason it was decided to inform the representatives of the different groups that the right to secede from the traditional tribal units would only be accorded to those units with populations with 2,000 or more, or to those who were prepared to amalgamate so as to form communities of this size." ⁶⁰

39. Interestingly, by and large, the policy outlined above worked out in practice, with most groups deciding to join forces on the basis of alleged kinship. Naturally, "there were however a few small groups who claimed to have no kinship with any other units and who obstinately refused to amalgamate with." ⁶¹ To deal with these groups, the administration appointed regents, known as *Wakil Hakuma* (representative of the government), who held administrative control over these groups. Secession from the control of a *Wakil Hakuma* was possible at any time should a group decide to join a recognized tribal unit or to amalgamate with other such groups to form a recognized tribal unit. Rather than submit to the control of a *Wakil Hakuma*, "several groups... [were] reminded of kinship with others and the numbers originally subject to the *Wakil Hakuma*... sensibly reduced." ⁶²

40. Having reorganized society into several discreet tribes (as well as a few subject to *Wakil Hakuma*), the British administration began attempting to relate the new tribal units to definite territorial areas. In addition, the administration sought to ensure that the new tribal units would conform to the separate districts of the western province. Given that many of the people concerned were pastoralists and that many members of the newly created tribes resided in any of a number of

districts, "this principle proved difficult to apply." ⁶³ Even so, the administration used the principle to curtail the size of newly created tribes:

41. "In the case of those larger groups which proved sufficiently substantial to qualify for independent tribal status in both districts, it was decided to disallow union."

⁶⁴

42. Yet in this process the administrators were far from consistent in their decisions, and in effect they contravened their own suggested principles. Thus, some groups that were too small to warrant tribal status in a single district were allowed to amalgamate with groups in other districts to constitute a tribal unit independent of the control of *Wakil Hakuma*. ⁶⁵

Results

43. In just under five months the British administration in the Western Province of Eritrea created, "20 wholly new tribes comprising a total population of 147,164," refashioned "8 former non-aristocratic tribes comprising a total population of 32,899", recast the "5 former aristocratic tribes" with a population of 12,875, and placed some 13,360 people under the control of the *Wakil Hakuma*. ⁶⁶ In all, 20 chiefs had been publicly elected as heads of the new tribes, and 591 subordinate chiefs had been elected as heads of the various tribal subdivisions. ⁶⁷ In effect, the British administration had changed the social organization of society in the western province forever.

44. The program carried out by the British was unashamedly antiaristocratic and aimed at disempowering the *Shumagulle*. British records clearly express their disdain for the former feudal lords of the western province. Referring to the "5 former aristocratic tribes," an administrator notes that, after the reorganization, they "now compr[ise] nothing more than an aristocratic residue of some 12,875 souls." ⁶⁸ In addition, though "it had been feared that the former aristocratic classes would hamper the work of reorganisation," the administration was pleased to note that "they have done no more than submit a formal protest or two and withdraw to sulk." ⁶⁹ In concluding its report on the tribal reorganization of the western province, the administration noted that:

45. "finally in terms of humanitarian achievement it is not unimportant that some 180,000 who are the descendants of generations of serfs extending over three hundred years or more, and who were until recently serfs themselves have at last been granted the freedom which they might expect from a civilised Government." ⁷⁰

46. Somewhat perceptively, the inactivity of the *Shumagulle* was attributed to "the widespread and naïve hope that with the coming of an Ethiopian or Italian Government the tables will be turned." ⁷¹ During the course of the Ethiopian Eritrean federation, attempts were made to reverse the decisions implemented by the British. But the changes instigated by the British had made it obvious to those living in the western province that access to land and political representation could be changed.

British Administration and the Western Province

47. It is of interest that the British administrators tended to view all developments in the western province in terms of people who lived in tribes, tribes that had been subjected by incoming invaders but that could and should be reestablished in the interests of stability. In their analysis of the situation in the western province, the British administrators created a "true history" in which the mass of people living in the western province could be assigned to not only precolonial, but also pre-18th century tribes. That is, the British sought to reestablish the alleged tribes to which Tigre people had belonged before they were allegedly parceled out among the *Shumagulle* elites. Equally interesting is to note that the administrators truly seem to have believed that, by lifting off what was seen as *Shumagulle* oppression, they would provide an opportunity for the precolonial tribes that allegedly continued to exist to reestablish themselves. That is, the British believed that they could dispose of the elites and reconstitute allegedly original tribes. What was to happen with the *Shumagulle* was not seriously discussed. Instead, the *Shumagulle* were seen as being a parasitic class whose function, in the realm of security and taxation, had been taken over by the colonial administration.

48. The evidence suggests that the British had already decided to reorganize the societies of the western province before the visit of the Four Powers Commission. The impending arrival of the commission was used by the British to justify their reorganization of society and to give their activities added legitimacy. This is not to deny that the majority of

people seem to have volunteered to accept the new dispensation. However, in the final analysis it was the British administration that sanctioned the developments and that alone decided who could and who could not join together.

49. A question that needs to be asked is why the British decided to resurrect tribes? Why did they not decide upon some other form of governance and social organization?⁷² The transformation of societies in the western province was not due merely to the troubles experienced in the region, but also to the manner in which British administrators felt that society should be organized. The British administration and its administrative colonial officials carried out its work in accordance with specific ideas relating to norms and values and tried to model society to fit these ideas.⁷³ In addition, it could be argued that the reorganization of society in the western province took place because of the rationalization of society demanded by colonial rule. This rationalization drew heavily on the insights provided by the sociological studies being carried out at the time throughout Africa. The Africa survey carried out by the Africa Institute and the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in central Africa were part and parcel of the same ideas and developments flowing through British Colonial Africa at the time. Research, particularly that being carried out by the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, seemed to suggest the ways in which society could be transformed.

Conclusion

50. The social changes implemented by the British—changes that completely altered access to land and political representation in the western province—had extremely far-reaching consequences. To a certain extent, the changes provided power and legitimacy to a new group of leaders who did not feel themselves to be represented in the new Eritrean-Ethiopian federation established in 1952.⁷⁴ It was also in this region of Eritrea that the first violent protests against federation took place.⁷⁵ After Ethiopian annexation of Eritrea in 1962, the armed struggle for the liberation of Eritrea from Ethiopian rule began in the western province.⁷⁶ The social reorganization of the societies of the western province under the British administration effectively broke feudal society and the control of feudal leadership in the western province.

Sources

1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, 1991); E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983); Werner Sollors (ed.), *The Invention of Ethnicity* (Oxford, 1989). For an introduction to further developments in this genre, see Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition Revisited," in Terence Ranger and Olufemi Vaughan, *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth Century Africa: Essays in Honour of A.H.M. Kirk-Greene* (London, 1993), 62-111.
2. Instrumental to the increased study of the topic in southern and central Africa was the work and book by Leroy Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (London, 1989).
3. Patrick Gilkes and Martin Plaut, *Foreign Policy in Focus: The War between Ethiopia and Eritrea* 5, no. 25, August 2000. Unfortunately, exactly why this should then have led to such a vicious war does not become clear from the article.
4. After Eritrean independence no research of which I am aware has been conducted on ethnicity in the country. Before independence the Research Branch of the EPLF Department of Politicization and Culture carried out ethnographic surveys. These are published weekly in summarized form in the English language *Eritrea Profile* newspaper, published by the Eritrean ministry of information, as a series of articles entitled, "Eritrean Traditions and Customs."
5. For example, see the work of James Quirin, "Caste and Class in Historical North-west Ethiopia: The Beta Israel (Falasha) and Kemant, 1300-1900," *Journal of African History* 39, no. 2 (1998): 195-220.
6. The words of Leroy Vail, though they were written with direct reference to the views of social scientists in the 1950s and 1960s, could just as well have been written with the views of the current Eritrean government in mind:

"They implicitly accept a basically evolutionary view of human history. In this view, the future ought to be better than the past, and 'better' has been assumed to flow from an increase in political scale and the growth of national unity – in short, from 'nation-building.' As a consequence,

most such analyses of ethnicity are concerned with the way it has traduced the promise of modernizing nationalism and are thus predisposed to negative judgments. Their emphasis, therefore, has been on ethnicity's role as a disrupter of the promising trends of secular nationalism that seemed to characterize African politics in the late 1950s and early 1960s and to promise a rosy future." Vail, *Creation of Tribalism*, 3.

7. Perhaps most extreme in this instance was the forced resettlement of thousands of Eritreans to regions of Southwestern Ethiopia during the course of the Eritrean war of independence.

8. Tekeste Negash, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882-1941: Policies, Praxis, and Impact* (Uppsala, 1987), 51.

9. The highland regions of Eritrea lay beyond the range of Axis bombers. Because of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, Eritrea was blessed with many highly skilled personnel as well as facilities in which these people could work. Indicating the high level of technical skill available is the fact that, from 1942 onward, American aircraft were assembled in Eritrea. In addition, Eritrean industries supplied the allied war effort with uniforms, boots, webbing, cigarettes, and beer.

10. PRO, FO 1015/1033, Half yearly report, Jan-June 1942, by the military administrator on the Occupied Enemy Territory Eritrea.

11. PRO, FO 1015/539, A study of the development of the present Shifta problem and the means whereby it can be remedied.

12. PRO, FO 1015/853, Annual Report 1950, p. 40.

13. PRO, FO 1015/945, Eritrean Final Report 1952, p. 1. For further discussion relating to the possible partitioning of Eritrea, see Tekeste Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience* (Uppsala, 1997), 41.

14. For a truly interesting article on the early history of the area, see Jacke Phillips, "Punt and Aksum: Egypt and the Horn of Africa," *Journal of African History* 38 (1997): 423-457.

15. Phillips, "Punt and Aksum," 449-450.

16. PRO, FO 1015/138, Tribal Administration in the Western Province of Ethiopia, p.1. Regarding pre-Italian administration in the areas of the western province, see Haggai Erlich, *Ras Alula and the Scramble for Africa: A Political Biography: Ethiopia & Eritrea, 1875-1897* (Asmara, 1996).

17. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 1.

18. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 2.

19. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 3.

20. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 3.

21. This seems to be a rendition of the Tigrinya word *Shimagles*, also glossed as *semagellÈ*, used for elders. See Richard Pankhurst, *A Social History of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, 1990), 266, and Kjetil Tronvoll, *Mai Weini: A Highland Village in Eritrea: A Study of the People, Their Livelihood, and Land Tenure during Times of Turbulence* (Asmara, 1998).

22. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 3.

23. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 5.

24. PRO, FO 1015/24, Four Powers Commission of Investigation for the former Italian colonies, Appendix 17, p. 1. Interestingly, exactly the same letter, which was published in Pollera, *Le popolazioni indigene*, is referred to in a letter by "Tigre Representatives" to the Four Powers Commission. FO 1015/24, Appendix 18, p. 4.

25. PRO, FO 1015/24, Appendix 17, p. 2.

26. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 5.

27. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 6.

28. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 6.

29. It is interesting to speculate that Tigre leaders seem to have taken the Allied war propaganda at face value and called the bluff of the British, who had promised the coming of a new age and dispensation. On British war propaganda at the time, see Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, 18-20, and James Ambrose Brown, *The War of a Hundred Days: Springboks in Somalia and Abyssinia, 1940-1941* (Johannesburg, 1990), 285-289.

30. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 7.

31. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 7.

32. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 7.

33. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 7.

34. PRO, FO 1015/539, p. 10. Interestingly, at the same time the British administration was reducing the number of administration officials in an effort to reduce administrative costs.

35. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 7.

36. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 8.

37. PRO, FO 1015/24, Appendix 18, p. 2. "Our position is worse than any form of slavery, a form that not even the Nazis have given the world."

38. PRO, FO 1015/24, Appendix 18, p. 16.

39. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 8.

40. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 8.

41. PRO, FO 1015/539, Appendix C, lists casualty figures due to *Shifta* activity. On transport shortages and lack of qualified administrative staff, see FO 1015/43, *Report by the War Office Working Party on Eritrea*, pp. 1-13.

42. PRO, FO 1015/43, p. 10.

43. S.F. Nadel wrote on the "races and tribes" of Eritrea, land tenure systems in the Eritrean highlands, and the history of the Beni Amer of western Eritrea.

44. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 8. Quoting from S. F. Nadel, "Notes on the Beni Amer Society," in *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1945.

45. PRO, FO 1015/138, Covering letter dated 24 January 1949.

46. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 8.

47. It must be born in mind that the British officials were at all times dependent on Eritrean and Italian officials, bureaucrats, and informants. As such, any query initiated by a British official had to pass through one or more people who more than likely had a subjective personal interest in the outcome of the query. On the political uncertainty and highly politicized nature of Eritrea at the time, see Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, 37-69.

48. On official censuses and investigations relating to tribal affiliation, ethnicity, and the like and the influence thereof on societies, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, 1991), Chapter 10.

49. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 8.

50. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 9.

51. PRO, FO 1015/24, see Appendices 16-19, which deal specifically with the western province. Note in particular British opposition to the inclusion of Appendix 17 in the report on the grounds that "it is of doubtful historical and racial accuracy."

52. For further information on the Four Powers, see Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, 22-24, and PRO, FO 1015/24, Four Power Commission of Investigation for the Former Italian Colonies: Report on Eritrea.

53. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 9.

54. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 9.

55. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 9.

56. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 10.

57. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 10.

58. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 12.

59. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 12-13.

60. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 13.

61. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 13.

62. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 14.

63. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 14.

64. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 14.

65. If anything, this indicates the pragmatic and solve-as-you-go attitude with which district officials had to work when they attempted to come to some form of arrangement in their districts.

66. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 16.

67. PRO, FO 1015/138, p. 16.

68. PRO, FO 1015/138, p.16.

69. PRO, FO 1015/138, p.16.

70. PRO, FO 1015/138, p.17.

71. PRO, FO 1015/138, p.16.

72. It is worth remembering that there were several calls for partition, whereby Muslim areas of Eritrea would become part and parcel of

Sudan. In this event, the western province would have become Sudanese.

73. At this juncture it is important to note the clear anti-aristocratic and democratic bias expressed by officials involved in the reorganization.

74. PRO, FO 1015/24 and FO 1015/853, detail the almost universal support enjoyed by the Moslem League in the western province.

75. Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia*, 129-131.

76. Dan Connell, *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Asmara, 1997). Primarily on account of its rugged terrain, particularly in the north, this area remained the heartland of the armed struggle against Ethiopian rule.

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