Violence and the acknowledgement of tense past in the Horn:

a note on the Ethio-Eritrean War (1998-2000)

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Neste artigo, o autor tenta descrever a maneira como, durante os dois anos de conflito sangrento onde o recém nascido Estado da Eritréia enfrentou a sua antiga «pátria», Etiópia, os dois anteriores aliados e «países irmãos» utilizaram a guerra como uma forma aberta de assumir as tensões que no passado existiram entre eles e no país em geral. Entre Maio de 1998 e Dezembro de 2000, quando um acordo de paz foi assinado em Alger, os dois países desencadearam uma guerra de propaganda extremamente violenta que acompanhou os combates no terreno e os sustentou. Esta «guerra de palavras» teve como objectivo não apenas a defesa dos direitos de cada um dos países sobre as áreas fronteiriças disputadas, mas ao mesmo tempo a projecção das identidades nacionais, re-encontradas pouco antes, bem como a consolidação da percepção interna destas identidades. Uma utilização pública do passado foi encenada numa tentativa para re-alinhar as identidades históricas dos dois países, adaptando-as ao novo contexto geo-político que se gerou depois da queda do anterior regime etíope, em 1991.

In this paper, the author attempt to describe how, during the two years of bloody conflict which confronted the newly-born State of Eritrea with its old «mother-country», Ethiopia, the two former allies and «brotherly» countries used war as an open way of acknowledging tense past between them and in the country at large. Between May 1998 and December 2000, when the peace accord was signed in Algiers, the two countries launched an extremely violent propaganda war which accompanied and sustained the fighting in the field. This «war of words» was aimed not only at defending the rights of each country over the disputed border areas, but at projecting as well the newly-found national identity and consolidating its internal perception. A public use of the past came to be enacted in an attempt to realign the historical identities of the countries and to adapt them to the new geo-political settings which came about with the demise of the previous Ethiopian regime in 1991.

Dans cet article, l'auteur essaie de décrire la façon comment, pendant les deux ans du conflit sanglant ou le nouveau-né État de l'Érythrée a fait face à son ancienne «patrie», l'Éthiopie, les deux anciens alliés e «pays frères» ont utilisé la guerre comme une forme ouverte d'assumer les tensions qui dans le passé ont existé entre eux, et dans le pays en général. Entre mai 1998 et décembre 2000, quand un accord de paix a été signé à Alger, les deux pays ont lancé une guerre de propagande extrêmement violente qui a accompagné et soutenu les combats sur le terrain. Cette «guerre de paroles» eut comme objectif non seulement la défense des droits de chacun des deux pays sur les régions frontalières disputées, mais en même temps la projection des identités nationales, nouvellement rencontrées peu avant, ainsi que la consolidation interne de la perception de ces mêmes identités. Une utilisation publique du passé a été mis en scène dans une tentative d'en arriver à un réalignement des identités historiques des deux pays, en les adaptant au nouveau contexte géo-politique survenu après la chute de l'antérieur régime éthiopien, en 1991.

In the thirty years of intermittent studies and contacts I had with Ethiopian friends and colleagues over their different interpretations of the country's past, I was often struck by the diverging and often opposing views of the country's history which they passionately held and which hotly divided groups coming from different cultural, social and particularly ethnic backgrounds[1]. This «divided» national ethos has lingered for many years in Ethiopian studies and in society at large but assumed political visibility more recently following the repression of ethnic politics and dissent by the Derg in the period 1974-1991, and the heightening of the local/regional element in the structure of the Ethiopian state due to the ethnically-based policies of the present regime.

The debate over the reading of the country's past involves different historiographical aspects and variant interpretations but is mainly focused on diverging views over the nature of the multi-ethnic state and the gradual process of expansion and amalgamation of its different nationalities. To some (the groups belonging to the Christian Highland Semitic-speaking Amhara-Tigray groups) the *«unity of the nation was assumed and largely unquestioned»*; they genuinely shared the long-held imperial view that *«Ethiopia was Abyssinia writ larger. The nation did not need to be built; it simply existed»*[2]. To others, mainly coming from the southwestern and eastern border regions which had been forcefully annexed by Emperor Menelik at the end of the nineteenth century, the Empire was a mere product of «internal colonialism» and a «prison of nations», if ever there was one[3].

The measure of individual and collective violence which accompanied the historical unfolding of the country has been differently evaluated by observers[4] and has become today a troublesome bone of contention in public discourse over the country's destiny. But most would agree with John Abbink that *«a gradual rooting of violence as a pattern and ideology of behaviour»* has become an institutional component of the Ethiopian experience in recent years, and today expresses itself, in the scholarly world, in the various radical modes of the historical discourse, themselves an indication of the growing «culture of violence» which accompanies today's debate over the growth and destiny of the Ethiopian state. According to Abbink, this «legacy of violence», which is yet to be fully explored and acknowledged in Ethiopia, goes back to the very foundation of the Ethiopian state, and must include both the forced incorporation by the Ethiopian State of its neighbouring peoples and the brutal colonial repression of the Fascist period (1935-1941), as well as the domestic violence of Haile Sellassie's modernisation policies. The brutal enactment of boundless state violence which became a daily practice during the Revolutionary years 1974-1991 resulted

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1 See Triulzi, 2002.

2 McClellan, 1996:60, fn. 38.

3 See Holcomb & Issa, 1990.

4 See, among others, Bahru, 1991; Mohammed Hassen, 1990; Asafa Jalata, 1993; Sorenson, 1991, 1993; De Waal, 1994; Baxter et al., 1996; Clapham, 1999, 2000.

finally in the «*crumbling of the Ethiopian state and of the imagination of a common Ethiopian identity*», both «*the alienation of people from the state, but also from each other*»[5]. The memory of this enduring structure of violence has lingered on more in private perceptions and individual and family remembrance than in public discourse For the most part, the acknowledgement of the country's past divisions and present sorrows have tended to remain till recently silent or muted: «*Memories of terror and violent death have been engrained in the minds and bodies of the population, and are ever-present in the country's collective memory. This collective memory can be said to consist of the shared but inarticulated recollection of experiences of violence and intimidation, which were internalized by people and muted in expression. This memory forms a frame of reference, which people recognize among each-other, but which is not openly talked-about*»[6].

In this paper I will attempt to describe how, during the two years of bloody conflict which confronted the newly-born State of Eritrea with its old mother-country, Ethiopia, the two former allies and «brotherly» countries used war as a direct and openly antagonistic way for acknowledging «tense past» between them and within the region at large. Between May 1998 and December 2000, when the peace accord was signed in Algiers, the two countries fought an extremely violent propaganda war which accompanied and sustained on both sides the fighting in the field. This «*war of words*»[7] was aimed not only at defending the reciprocal rights of each country over the disputed borders but at projecting as well the newly-acquired national identities after the breaking away of Eritrea. A public use of the past thus came to be enacted during the war in an attempt to realign the historical identity of each country and to adapt it to the new geo-political set-up which came about with the demise of the Derg regime in 1991.

In this way, war was used as a storehouse for acknowledging tense past between the two countries and for indicting each other's faults in the shaping of the national destiny. The conflict thus created new venues for historical assertions and denials in the region. In the course of the war, two opposing visions of national identity came to be proposed. The fact that the Eritrean identity had to be carved out of a previously shared Ethiopian one made matters all the more fierceful and inevitably painful. Acknowledging tense past between the two peoples became a way to distinguish the two «nations» at war. The resulting «war of words» was fought by way of public statements as well as through debasing accusations and insults which were voiced in the media and, increasingly, in the air. The respective diaspora joined in and loudly took part in the globalized realm of internet[8]. New suppressed memories were made to surface and came to be articulated during this period in a fierce battle of definitions

5 Abbink, 1995, p. 71.

6 *Idem*, p. 59.

7 Abbink, 1998.

8 For Ethiopia see the collection of «Despatches» now printed in Walta Information Center, n.d., and the forum and chat pages of *Ethioforum, Warka, or Ethio.com*. For Eritrea, see the web sites of *Asmarino.com, Dehai.org, Eritrea1.org*, etc.

and slogans concerning the «we» and «them», the «nation» and its «enemy». New sites of memory came to be proposed, while old ones were revisited and rewritten in the field. Thus war itself became a living «lieu de mémoire», a realm which visibly revealed old rivalries and long-felt chains of collective resentment. War events were thus lived as occasions of memory, «history-repeating-itself» in such a way as to confirm the new identity of the nation-in-the-making, offended and denied by the other side's national destiny; commemorating war events became a way to come to terms publicly and settle accounts with a troubled past, to disentangle oneself, so to speak, from the once-shared collective memory of the country. The war at the border was thus accompanied and sustained by a parallel war of memories inside both countries.

The conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea offers an interesting case of acknowledgement of tense past which may be of interest here to compare, and contrast, with parallel cases in the region. It is not my aim here to discuss the conflict's causes or describe its foreseable consequences for both countries in the political geometry of the region. The Ethio-Eritrean war remains as yet the most intriguing and the least analysed or explained among the region's conflicts in an area which has witnessed recurrent forms and transformations of collective violence[9]. Rather, I am interested here to outline how war itself was used in Ethiopia to help the country's settling accounts with, and re-shaping of, its own past. The historiographical change of course owes nothing to the war itself, whose causes and results are yet to be settled, but to the way the conflict has been presented to the Ethiopian public particularly by the State media (including internet) and in the private press.

As I had a chance of visiting the country repeatedly since the beginning of the conflict, I will report here my experience of living through these war events and discussing them with several Ethiopian and Eritrean colleagues as they were unfolding. Being Italian, I was particularly struck by the sudden «return of memory» the conflict unleashed in the collective memory of the country concerning the earlier «act of aggression» by Fascist Italy in 1935. All along the two-year conflict, war events were locally commented with a constant «look backward» effect, with the Eritreans acting as the new external threat to the country's integrity as colonial Italy had done in the past. Old and new sites of memory thus emerged during the conflict, and the memory of the Battle of Adwa, whose centenary had just been celebrated three years earlier, was called back, this time as a *memory-against* no longer geared to the Italian invader but to the newly-coined aggressor, «fascist» Eritrea.

«During the era of colonialism. Eritrea has served as the citadel of Italian Fascism [...]. *And as if the deeds of colonial times were not enough, it is once again the Eritrean elite which, in their effort to rekindle the Italian dream,* [...] *started the current conflict. Just like the Italian*

For a detailed account of the war in internet and a description of the various web pages involved in the conflict, see Guazzini, 2001.

9 For an analysis of the Ethio-Eritrean war, see Abbink 1998, Trivelli 1998, Gilkes & Plaut 1999, Medhane 1999, Tekeste & Tronvoll, 2000, Clapham, 2000.

master once did, it is the Eritreans who have caused the displacement of over 300,000 people from their homes. It is the Eritreans who have invaded the Ethiopian territory, and despite resolutions from the world body to withdraw from Ethiopian territory, have given a deaf ear to the world community»[10].

Although the historical analogy with colonial Italy reflected in many ways a search for legitimacy by the Tigrayan leadership over a fractured country, there is no doubt that the traumatic experiences of the Italian aggression, and the transfer of guilt to the Eritrean enemy which was shaped in the course of the conflict, helped sustain the war effort and was used to instill a national sense of belonging of which the Eritreans were no longer part.

This became particularly clear after Ethiopia's counter-offensive of 23-26 February 1999 which disrupted the Eritrean line of defense around the town of Badme and repelled the enemy across the border[11]. The crushing victory at the Badme front followed nine months of desultory trench warfare and extensive military build-up during which the Government had been repeatedly called to task for inaction. The military victory over the Eritrean enemy was to be celebrated accordingly. Thus, although the official news of the successful counter-offensive against Eritrean troops at the Badme front was announced on February 27, *«the government did not encourage street celebrations on the subsequent days. The TPLF government wanted to score a propaganda victory as well by delaying it until the 103d Anniversary of the famous Victory of the Battle of Adwa, thereby equating the Badme success with the glorious victory of Adwa. Thus on the eve of the 103d anniversary, the Lualawinet and Secutiry Committee of Addis Ababa City Council called on the people to come out into Mesqel Square to celebrate the double victory on March 2, 1999»*[12].

On that day, the traditional commemoration of the Battle of Adwa saw a «mammouth crowd» variously estimated between 500.000 and one million people gather for the Adwa anniversary celebrations at Masqal Square[13]. The unusual mass attendance – possibly the greatest gathering of city residents since the coming to power of the new Government[14] – was reported by Richard Lee, BBC correspondent in Addis Ababa, in the following terms: *«There were remarkable scenes this morning in Addis Ababa* [...]. *The Masqal Square which used to be known as Revolution Square was overflown with up to a million people. There were groups of people chanting and dancing, singing praise*

10 Tesfay Debrezion, *Mussolini's Choir*, posted 10 June 1999, in Walta Information Center n.d. [2000], pp. 121-122. Square brackets in the original text. The collection contains several hundred messages posted on the Ethiopian Walta Web Site.

11 The victory of Badme, which left on the ground an estimated 20,000 casualties on both sides, saw a gruesome 3-day Ethiopian assault on fortified Eritrean positions. The battle was fought between 23-26 February with mop up operations the following day. The military operation, which was titled *Operation Sunset*, derived its name from a quote by the Eritrean President, Isayas Afeworki, that Eritreans would not withdraw from the occupied territories «not even if the sun doesn't rise». See Press Digest (English, private weekly, hence PD), 4 March 1999, pp. 1-3.

12 See the special report in *Ethiopian Register*, April 1999, pp. 9-11.

13 See report in PD, 11 March 1999, p. 9. Ethiopian Police gave the lower figure the day after the event. See *The Monitor* (English, private weekly), 4 March 1999.

14 Contrary to the previous regime, the EPRDF Governement had been so far loth in supporting mass rallies.

songs for the soldiers at the front and also denouncing the Eritrean government. Many people were carrying placards [...]. *At one point, there was an effigy of the Eritrean President which was paraded around the square. They tried to burn it but they were stopped by the police. So, instead, they just threw it on the ground and kicked and tore it to shreds*»[15].

Clearly, the tension which had accumulated in Ethiopia in the long «*nine months of patience*»[16], and during the heated propaganda war which was daily exchanged between the two countries all along the conflict[17], found in the anniversary of the 1896 major victory over the Italian army a long-repressed relief. But there was more to it. Because of the calculated matching of the dates of the two war events, the Battle of Badme soon became to be equalled to its more famous predecessor, the Battle of Adwa. Thus Badme was conveniently labelled «the second Adwa». During the following week practically all electronics and print media equalled «Ethiopia's resounding defeat over a numerically mammouth Eritrean army» to the «historic feat» accomplished at Adwa in 1896[18]. The argument was best synthetized by *Abyiotawi Demokrasi*, a private Amharic weekly in these terms: «*Some 103 years ago a historic feat was accomplished: Ethiopian warriors, armed with primitive weapons but full of courage, trounced a well-armed, well organized aggressor army from Italy. Forty years later, Fascist Italy's army invaded Ethiopia once again. Its cowardly army used internationally prohibited poison gas. Its victory was short-lived, and was finally kicked out, humiliated. Nine months ago, Issaias Afeworki, a brainchild of his Italian colonial masters, invaded Ethiopia. True to their history, Ethiopians once again punished and will continue to punish this latest aggressor*[...]»[19].

The Ethiopian Register, an Amhara-based diaspora journal normally quite critical of the Tigrean-led Ethiopian Government at home, commented the event in no less glowing terms: «*Whether there is coincidence or not, March 2 is the 103 anniversary of the Italian defeat at Adwa under the leadership of* Atse *Menelik. Whether intended or not, or by coincidence or not, the symbolic metaphor is not lost that yet another arrogant enemy was humiliated on the same day as the Italian colonialists were routed. There was national unity then, as there was unprecedented national unity now, against aggression*»[20].

The historical comparison between Adwa and Badme was not unexpected. The «war of words» which had preceded the Ethiopian victory on the Badme front had seen a massive propaganda effort on both sides which made frequent use of insulting epithets and debasing accusations. On the Ethiopian side (the only one I can witness here), war propaganda closely associated Eritrean aggression to Italian colonial ambitions in the region and to the legacy of racist arrogance they had left behind.

15 PD, 11 March 1999, p. 10.

16 «*We endured foreign occupation and humiliation for nine months in the hope that the international community would convince Eritrea to accept a peaceful solution to the conflict*», Office of the Government Spokesperson, Official Statement, 6 March 1999, *Addis Zemen* (Amharic, Government daily) 7 March 1999 as quoted in PD. 11 March 1999, p. 11.

17 See Abbink, 1998:554.

18 See PD, 4 March and 11 March 1999.

19 *Abyiotawi Demokrasi* (Amharic, weekly private) 2-8 March 1999, as quoted in PD, 11 March 1999, p. 11.

20 Mamo Muchie, «From Adwa to Badme: Lessons from History», *Ethiopian Register*, April 1999, p. 32.

Reacting to President Issayas' remarks made on 18 July 1998 that the «elite of Tigray have this baggage of feeling inferior, marginalised and wanting to assert itself by expanding territory», an anonymous internet dispatcher calling himsef Dagmawi responded by indicting «The Fascist-era ideology: *it humiliated Eritreans and relegated them to sub-human status. In the search for positive self-identity, those Eritrean elites who had adopted some superficial Italian cultural aspects began to look down upon their 'uncivilised' fellowmen. The self-hatred caused by Italian colonialism was turned around and reflected on the common people of Ethiopia and Eritrea who were still in tune with their culture. It is this attitude which has been pepretuated through the past several decades, sadly contaminating the Eritrean identity. It is this phenomenon which has created the paradox whereby the indigenous cultural heritage of Axum is disparaged and the current inhabitants of the town derided as 'Agames'. In its place the Eritreans substitute the foreign trappings left behind by the departing Italians and cherish these relics as if they created them themselves*»[21].

Although the state media were more restrained in their formal statements and official declarations[22], both electronic and printed media particularly in the private press made recurrent use of Italian war images of the Fascist period manipulating faces and slogans to point to the new Eritrean «fascists» and to their coarse parrotting the ex-colonial masters. Thus a *National Geographic* picture of 1935 showing young Eritrean boys swearing «to become loyal balillas» was transformed in the web into «*Issaias and Eritrean boys tak*[ing] *the oath and swear*[ing] *to become loyal balillas*», the picture itself being heavily manipulated as the Eritrean President's face was superimposed to that of the Italian militia officer[23]. Terms such as «banda», «fascist», «ascari», people affected by «the mulatto disease» or by «the abused wife syndrome» were often used to indicate the Eritrean enemy in the Ethiopian media and the private press, thus indicating the continuity between the old Eritrean «collaborators» and their present heirs in the new «colonial regime» at Asmara, their government named constantly «shabia» from the old EPLF times of war, while the term «woyane», after the Tigrean rebellion of 1943, was constantly used by the Eritreans to denote the Ethiopian TPLF leadership.

The crude labelling was not just a rhetorical device which graphically aired the growing resentment among the Tigray leadership vis-à-vis the old allies now turned into enemies. As the conflict built up, the deep contrasts between the two Fronts, which had accompanied all along the uneasy anti-Mengistu alliance[24], were openly debated breaking a tradition of secrecy which had been typical of the two Fronts but

21 Dagmawi, posted 30 September 1998, in Walta Information Cemter, cit., p. 117.

22 Not so the Ethiopian daily radio broadcasts in Tigrinya addressed to the Eritrean public, themselves an answer to the vitriolic propaganda daily broadcasted in Amharic from Asmara.

23 The National Geographic picture was shown repeatedly on Internet in the «Ethiopia-Eritrea Conflict Webpage», a private pro-Ethiopian network. See http://www.geocities.com (consulted 13.05.1999). Another much abused image was the one depicting Hitler talking to Mussolini and stating, in the superimposed caption pointing to a smiling Issaias, «He is MY student and I have taught him well. One day he will be a real fascist under OUR command». The picture was printed in the forum at http://www.ethio.com (cons. 13.05.1999).

24 On the contrasts between TPLF and EPLF see in particular Young 1996, pp. 105-120.

which was now allowed to surface in the public arena. In fact, the internal contrasts between the old allies in the field – TPLF and EPLF – was soon submerged by a much broader and widespread anti-Eritrean resentment which openly surfaced within the Ethiopian public, promptly stimulated by a strong propaganda machinery which daily ignited and kept it alive. The resentment had many causes of which the forced independence of Eritrea agreed by the two Fronts in the absence of a public debate, and the expulsion of some 120,000 Ethiopians from independent Eritrea were by no means the only ones: the privileged position Eritrean citizens maintained in Ethiopia particularly after the 1993 referendum, their enjoying a de facto dual citizenship which allowed them to keep positions of power and wealth in the two countries, and the protection accorded them by the EPRDF government, were equally important factors. The ensuing deportation of some 60,000 Ethiopian citizens of Eritrean origin was the sad outcome, and the late replica, of the earlier expulsions from independent Eritrea of the Ethiopian military and administrative personnel together with their families[25].

Yet the war unleashed another tense but hidden memory: that of the Eritrean collaborators in the 1935 Italian occupation of the country. Until the recent conflict, on the whole Eritreans had not been made accountable for their past participation in the Italian colonial venture and occupation of the country. Following the liberation in 1941, and particularly after the federation with Eritrea in 1952, the nationalistic mythology which developed around the anti-Fascist resistance required a certain «degree of historical amnesia» which was to sooth the newly-found unity between ex resisters, exiles and collaborators.

«*In this nationalistic environment, tacit encouragement was given to amplify one's contribution and tactfully to avoid discussion of the deficiencies of others. Individuals who had served the Italians as* askaris *(regular soldiers) or* bande *(irregulars) largely became mute, unwilling and unencouraged to say much about the wartime experiences. Certainly the history books did not record their involvement (or did so minimally) and there was little serious effort to understand why they made the choices that they did*»[26].

Thus, throughout the post-liberation period, it was the Eritrean patriots' resistance to Italian rule which was celebrated and many Eritreans were called in to help in the post-war reconstruction effort. Thus, the fact that Eritrean troops accompanied the Italian colonial army in 1896, and were massively used during the short-lived Fascist occupation of the country, became part of a grieved yet silenced past. Ironically, the Eritrean «colonial» factor was not allowed to surface in Ehiopian society till the Eritrean liberation movement decided to employ it to define its strategy for independence, and even then it was openly dismissed by Ethiopia in her consis-

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25 The trauma of the reciprocal deportations and dehumanizing modalities which accompanied them will remain in the collective memory of both Ethiopians and Eritreans yet another unacknowledged and unaccountable structure of violence in the region. On this point see Gilkes & Plaut, 1999, pp. 11, 54-56.

26 McClellan, 1996:66.

tent denial of Eritrea's request for independence as an ex-colonial country wanting to decolonise. Yet, in a few months, the war with Ethiopia changed all this, and the war freely unleashed an anti-Eritrean «colonial» memory which till then had been repressed or removed.

Then the real meaning of the Ethio-Eritrean conflict, and the historic importance of the victory of Badme-Adwa, was to make the separation between two «brother» countries possible because it transformed, albeit traumatically, a political event (the Eritrean independence) into a cultural one. In this sense the conflict has been a real turning point for both countries and the lengthy war, though miscalculated at first, helped consolidating a separate identity for both: this is perhaps one of the main reasons why it lasted so long. The conflict helped forging, perhaps irrevocably, an Eritrean national alterity which was denied throughout thirty years of war but which confronts today the Ethiopian society and its acknowledgement of a peculiarly tense past. If Ethiopia was to be separated from Eritrea, it needed an irrevocable cesure. The war events helped to provide it: «*Badme is a place of no particular consequence in the highlands between Ethiopia and its much smaller kin, Eritrea, two nations of great promise in the Horn of Africa. But lying on the battlefields near the town are the corpses of 10,000 soldiers – maybe less, maybe more – who died over the last month because each nation claims Badme and the surrounding area as its own*»[27].

It is the corpses of those «*10,000 soldiers, maybe less, maybe more*» that are making the irrevocable difference deep inside the Ethiopian nation and its ethos of wounded outrage and irreparable moral offence: «*The cluster bombs dropped* [over] *elementary schools killing children, and the bombs dropped on innocent civilians who were in line to receive food assistance in Adigrat, and the exodus of the Eritreans from Ethiopia and Ethiopians from Eritrea have assured us that we will be two separate and distinct countries*»[28].

As the Tplf-led coalition gradually consolidated its leadership over a country-in-arms, the war achieved important political assets for the Ethiopian government. Although its policies were critically exposed in the private press before the war, the political returns of the victorious events were clearly perceived:

«*The Ethiopian Government, which had low support in the country because of the ever deteriorating economy, has now allied Ethiopians behind it and garnered a lot of support. Though Ethiopians may have their domestic grievances, they are ready to defend their country… No doubt that the Government of Ethiopia has taken full advantage of this war, which is indeed a blessing to it. It has armed and fortified itself and maybe for the first time has become untouchable both for domestic and outside threat*»[29].

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[27] Ian Fisher, «Whenever that town is, someone will die for it» (reprinted from *The New York Times*), in *The Reporter* (English, private weekly), 24 March 1999.

[28] Sotal, «Eritrea and Ethiopian Bitter Divorce» (Part II), in *Addis Tribune*, 12 March 1999.

[29] Hashim Ahmed, «Eritrea's Prblem is a Leadership Future», in *Addis Tribune*, 12 March 1999, cit. Not all private press aligned itself. On June 3 *Tobyia* (Amharic, weekly private) wrote: «We had thought that we have avoided war once and for all and restored lasting peace in our country. Sad enough, we have once again sled into another morass of war – a war of destruction and misery… [while] another round of drought and famine is hovering over the country». See PD, 10 June 199, p. 6.

And again, soon after the end of hostilities, observers agreed that «*Ethiopia's latest offensive against Eritrea has undoubtedly strengthened the position of the ruling coalition government. The war has produced a new sense of national unity and removed much of the suspicion and distrust with which the EPRDF administration has been viewed by many Ethiopians previously concerned about Tigrayan dominance in national politics*»[30].

At the historiographical level, the present conflict is further inspiring a new Tigrean-oriented historical writings which the recent victory over Eritrea appears to sanction and legitimate on the ground. According to Medhane Tadesse[31], Tigray always acted in Ethiopian history as the «senior partner» of the wider Tigrinya-speaking region. It was the Tigray lords who had «precedence and grandeur» over their northern rivals since Alvarez times and always «acted as protectors of their junior partners to the north of the Mereb»[32]. It was Italian colonial presence that first instilled «*an incipient supremacist feeling among the Tigrinya-speaking Eritrean urban elite vis-à-vis the Tigray and other Ethiopian nationalities*», while colonial Fascism inevitably bred «*the mutation in the character, behaviour as well as socio-cultural identity*» of particularly the modern urbanized Eritrean elite. Fiat cars and Italian villas thus gave the Eritreans a false sense of superiority which entrenched itself and affected Eritrean nationalism at a time when Tigray was impoverished and starved by a centralized feudal state[33].

But the Tigray political elite, tells us Medhane, did not fall into the easy trap of Eritrean-tigrinya nationalism. From the beginning it opted for Ethiopia and maintained its pledge throughout. Thus the anti-Mengistu struggle which was fought together with the ex-Eritrean allies is explained today by Tigrean intellectuals as being only tactical, beleaguered as it was by continuous superiority complexes and arrogant behaviour by EPLF, and by deep strategic and political divergences[34]. Thus, while TPLF reorganized the country under a coalition government and, although traumatically, «*applied the principle of self-determination and ethnic federalism*», EPLF went on building, as it had been doing from the start, «a nation from above». The two governments thus adopted «diametrically opposite and even hostile political systems»[35].

Seen in this perspective, the victory over the Eritrean aggressor is indeed a «second Adwa», a major war of national identity and the beginning of a new cycle of state formation and consolidation of supremavy in the region of the Horn[36]. It has helped the country to redefine an enduring site of memory and charge it with new symbolic meanings which were daily sanctioned by the conflict itself. It is through war that

30 P. Biles, «Bitter Foes», *Diplomatic Briefings*, Addis Ababa, Vol. XV, No. 72, 2000. p. 22.

31 See Medhane Tadesse 1999. Though not an official publication, the volume has been massively diffused in Addis Ababa and in the media.

32 See ibid., pp. 5-7.

33 Ibid., pp. 26-43.

34 Ibid., pp. 50-86. For a similar argument, see Adhana 1994.

35 Ibid., p. 102.

36 In this sense also Clapham, 2000.

Ethiopian society was brought to internalise the political wound of Eritrean independence, while strengthening at the same time the feeling of unity in the country.

How much this war-created unity is of a flimsy nature is shown by the recent crises which assailed recently both the Ethiopian and the Eritrean governments, with serious splits among the two leading political fronts, mass arrest of opponents following student protests and the early stepping down of the Ethiopian President Negaso Gidada from office. While the internationally-supervised demarcation of the border is hampered by political and technical difficulties on the ground, observers recognise today that the «*nature of the violence perpetrated in this two-year war has sunk in deep into the public consciousness*» and has been dangerously «internalized»: «*The deep antipathy, and often hatred, now generated is a social fact which will have serious consequences. Of course not the violence in battle but the often unspeakable abuses against civilians that created the deep resentment, also among people with no interest in politics and no commitment to yet another war: the expulsions of each other's citizen, the arbitrary killings and disappearance of people, the robbing of labour migrants of all of their possessions and savings, the internment of so-called 'enemy people' in camps under dismal conditions, the physical abuse, and the torturing and humiliating of ordinary people*»[37].

If the rationale of the war was to «*create difference and anchor it psychologically*» in the country at large, the war has been an easy win, and its net result will be «*the impending creation of an iron-clad, physical border between Ethiopia and Eritrea, in an area of trans-border contacts and shared identities,* [which] *will yield a new element of instability*»[38].

Such a border in fact has been and will remain of artificial colonial nature. It will divide cross-border groups and local communities, such as the Irob, the Kunama and the Afar, who have always lived, and have been purposely maintained, at the periphery of any colonial or internal government: «*people on the borders who have for centuries never known the difference: worshipped together, celebrated together and intermarried.* [...] *This war is easier for someone from Addis Ababa and Asmara than those living in Zalambessa, Irob, and Badme. People there on both sides of the border have more in common with the 'enemy' than with their countrymen. This is a conflict that splits family members into two military camps. It has brought Cousin against Cousin. Trying to draw a straight boundary line through the people above is in itself a crime.* [...] *Hatred that has already been plowed will be harvested, and there will not be an end after the conclusion of the war.* [...] *The most probable outcome of this war* [is] *that there will not be a winner and a loser, only two losers*»[39].

The tremendous social and human costs of the Ethio-Eritrean war, the toll of human and material distruction it has left in the entire border region, and the new unacknowledged «legacy of violence» it will leave in the region of the Horn, may soon form a new intractable web of divisive memories which may be even more difficult to appease or simply acknowledge in the future.

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37 Abbink, 2001: 449-50.
38 Ibid., pp. 448-49.
39 Sotal, cit., p. 9.

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