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Yasin, Yasin Mohammed

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Yasin Mohammed Yasin

## Political history of the Afar in Ethiopia and Eritrea<sup>1</sup>

### *Summary*

Like in many parts of Africa, the colonial map-making has left its deep-seated mark on the political features of present-day states in the Horn of Africa. As the making of the boundaries was entirely based on the vested interest of European expansionists that absolutely ignored the ethnic make-up of societies, similar ethno-linguistic groups were cut up to two or more adjacent states. These divisions, that gravely challenged the traditional administrative as well as socio-economic systems further fuelled conflicts in the Horn region.

Among many cases of such tragic partitions, the land of the homogeneous nomadic nation of Afar was divided among three states in the African Horn, namely Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. Subsequent to their anti-colonial resistance, the Afar have faced further intrastate divisions and marginalization enforced by the central powers in the respective states. Their half-a-century old quest of and struggle for self-determination was regarded as paving the way to an independent state. Is creating a nation called Afarria or else the Afar Triangle the ultimate goal of the Afar political movements? What does unity and self-determination mean for the Afar? This paper will discuss the inception of the modern political orientation of the Afar and their struggle from the era of European colonialism to the time of domestic domination.

### *Keywords*

*Ethiopia, Eritrea, Afar, self-determination*

Over the years, the pastoral political system in the African Horn received minimal attention from academics, intelligentsia and policy makers at all levels. Rather, intra-pastoral communities' conflicts as well as violent centre-periphery disputes were seen as a very simple traditional confrontation over access to pasture and water and/or a minority's failure to understand

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<sup>1</sup> Without a generous grant from the French Centre for Ethiopian Studies (FCES), it would have been impossible for me to undertake this research project. I therefore would like to extend my sincere thanks to FCES. Yet any omissions or errors in this study paper remain mine.

natural resources as state property. And hence, it was believed that pastoralism related confrontations resulted in minimal or no influence on national politics. This age-old misperception, however, led stakeholders to play down the inter-relationship between pastoral politics and national, regional as well as global peace and security.

Nevertheless, in a post 9/11 world, mass 'eyes' and 'ears' are struggling to feel the beat of the most marginalised and the most strategic East African Coast regions. Nowadays, geo-political strategic areas in the Horn region, which are believed to openly provide a haven to international terrorists, attract a great deal of attention from the global media, academics and politicians at every level. But still, outsiders' fixed-focus cameras could not get beyond dwelling extensively on security issues related to the area, focusing particularly on the generalist view of 'Islam and Terrorism' and missing the socio-cultural and politico-economical features of the nomadic inhabitants in the Horn region.

The kidnapping of a group of five Europeans and a dozen Ethiopian guides and helpers in the Afarland of Danakil Depression in March 2007 remained a problem to many. During this incident, one senior European diplomat in Addis Ababa asked me whether there was any possible link between the Afar rebel group, Ugugumo that claimed responsibility for the March 2007 kidnapping, and the Al-Qaeda. Surprisingly enough, Ugugumo raised arms against the TPLF's<sup>2</sup> intrusion into the northern Afarland, nearly three decades ago, even before the world was gripped by the 'War on Terrorism'.

Indeed, the Afar pastoralists who inhabit the African Horn coastal lines, which is a bridge between Africa and the Middle East as well as a gateway to the oil fields of the Persian Gulf, are all followers of the faith of Islam. This occurs to none as a current link with Al-Qaeda. But it shows the possibility that as they are strategic minorities, forgotten by regional and international bodies, they might be good candidates for recruitment by Al-Qaeda or any other terrorist group's chain in the Horn region.

The nomadic Afar population that is suffering a high level of poverty and an extreme deterioration of living conditions may gradually turn the faith of their millennia-old conception of Islam, as a realm of personal belief and spiritual value, towards extremism and violent protest. Although the Afar are not easily susceptible to extreme ideas promoted by organisations such as Al-Qaeda there is a possibility, if marginalisation and domination persist and the socio-economic situations continue to deteriorate, that people will become so desperate that the extreme religious elements could gain some support among the Afar. Here it is important to mention the case of Somalia. The Somali, similar to the Afar, are not conservative Moslems. But

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2 All acronyms used are spelt out at the end of this article in a separate list.

the Islamic militias, better known as the Council of Islamic Courts whose prominent figures are leaders of Al Ittihad Al Islamiya, the East African wing of Al-Qaeda, gained support among some Somali mainly because people became desperate after so many years of a series of failures and miseries which led to hopelessness. Hence a greater understanding of relevant phenomena of the region seems a crucial issue. This paper will assess the political history of one of the nomadic societies in the Horn region, particularly the Afar of Ethiopia and Eritrea. It reviews the development trends of a well-rooted political consciousness of the Afar people and focuses briefly on the modern political movements from a historical point of view.

## Historical background

Adal, Adali, Oda'ali, Teltal and Dankali are names traditionally given to the Afar by neighbouring people. The Amhara, Oromo and Somali respectively borrowed the names Adal, Adali and Oda'ali, which sounds the same as the ancestor of the dynasty and the son of Hadal Mahis,<sup>3</sup> Ado'ali (Afar: white Ali).

Similarly, due to historic commercial contacts between Arabian sailors and the Dankali clan located around Baylul, who ruled the Kingdom of Dankali (15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century), Arabs gave the name Danakil to all the Afar across the Red Sea Coast. Teltal however is a derogatory name used by Tigrigna highlanders that derived from the Tigrigna word 'Menteltal', meaning hanging-down (of breast) in order to describe women of the lowland Afar as uncivilized because they did not cover their bodies from the waist up.

Despite all the names, the Afar invariably call themselves 'Afar', which has no meaning in the Afar language. Rainmondo Franchetti relates the word 'Afar' to the mythical Ophir the 11<sup>th</sup>, in the order of son of Joktan, son of Shem, son of Noah. Whereas the Afar rather believe themselves to be in the line of the generation of Kush, son of Ham, son of Noah, who were among 'the first Kushites to move from their original home and settle in the Danakil Depression' (Murdock 1959: 319).

Moreover many argued that the biblical land of Ophir, the land rich in Gold is located in India or South Arabia rather than being that of the Afarland in the African Horn. Didier Morin designates the name Afar as having a possible but forgotten link with the Omani group called Afar or Ifar. AL-Shami argued that the name Afar might be drawn from the South Yemenis Ma'fara sub-clan of the Hamedta tribe who were the traditional rulers of

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3 In the Afar traditional genealogical discourse, Hadal Mahis (Gibdo) is the man who was under the tree in the morning, the ancestor of several Afar tribes and son of Omar, son of Yussuf al Yemeni.

Ardel Huria territory in the east of Bab-el-Mandeb<sup>4</sup> across the Afar coasts on the Red Sea.

Despite having different meanings for their name, the Afar people have a distinct cultural and linguistic identity of their own and inhabit a well-defined territory in the African Horn; an area commonly referred to as the Afar Triangle<sup>5</sup> which is divided between Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti.

The land inhabited by the Afar in the Horn region is well known as the cradle for early human origin<sup>6</sup> and for its abundance of natural resources as well.<sup>7</sup> Geo-political features of the Afarland further magnify its strategic importance. For instance, about 75% of all vital roads that link Addis Ababa to the harbours of Assab and Djibouti run via the Afarland. Likewise the most utilised river in Ethiopia, Awash (Afar: We'ayot) that regularly floods over 1200 km runs through the Afar region of Ethiopia.

The Afar coastline in Eritrea and Djibouti, which is a bridge between Africa and the Middle East as well as a gateway to the oil fields of the Persian Gulf further magnifies the global importance of the Afarland. The Arabs desire to exert a dominant influence in the area. Westerners have a fundamental interest in the security of the petroleum tanker routes that pass via Bab-el-Mandeb. The Israelis have a strategic interest in it as a naval base,

4 Bab-el-Mandeb (Arabic) the Gate of Tears or the Gate of the wailing Yard is a strategic strait of great importance. It joins the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and is 30 km wide at its narrowest from Ras Henheli on the Arabian coast to Ras Siyan on the African.

5 The Afar Triangle stretches from the northern most fringes of the Boori peninsula to the vicinity of the Abyssinian highland plateau in the west. The eastern border of the Triangle extends from the city of Djibouti in the south following the railway line from Ererh to Awash town. And both the west-east borderlines meet at Namale Fan, which is 75 miles NE of Addis Ababa. The north-south Afar coastal line along the Red Sea shores is over 800 miles long.

6 Remains of *Ardipithecus Ramidus Kadabba* (A.R.K.) and the earliest human ancestor *Ardipithecus Ramidus* (A.R.) that dated 5.2-5.8 and 4.4 million years ago respectively were found in a place called Aramis in the Afar region of Ethiopia. In Afar language Arid means 'ground', Ramidus derived from Ramid, meaning 'root' and Kaddabba means 'grandfather'. Primitive hominids *Australopithecus Afarensis* that lived between 3-4 million years ago, and *Australopithecus Garhi* (Gari means surprise in Afar language), and transition between *Afarensis* and early human erectus that lived about 2.5 million years ago are found in the Afarland. Fossil of the 3 years old girl, 'little Selam' (peace) dated 3.3 million years ago was also discovered recently in a palace called Kikka in the Afar land of Ethiopia.

7 One of the earth's great active volcanoes, Erta'ale is found in the Afar Depression. It results in the existence of major mineral occurrence like Potash, Sulphate, Bentonite, Gypsum and Salt (Amole salt bars were used as a medium of exchange in many parts of the Horn region). In addition there are also promising geothermal energy sources and hot springs in different areas in the Afar Depression. There are many potential sites of oil and gas resources in the Afar Triangle. Two major national reserves of Ethiopia, Awash National Reserve and Yangudu Ras National Park are also found in the Afarland.

monitorial centre and for accumulating nuclear wastes especially on Dahlak and Fatma islands. There is also the recent US interest in the Horn due to the global campaign against terrorism attracting global attention to the Afarlands in the Horn of Africa.

It is in these general situations that, at different points in time, the Afarland in the African Horn has been severely affected by the geopolitical perceptions of both regional and international powers. The ancient Axumite kingdom and the South Arabian adventurers and sailors influenced coastal areas and islands in the Red Sea repeatedly. In the medieval period, Ottoman Turkish power extended its loose influence on the Afar coasts from Massawa to Zeila. Thereafter, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the French and Italians occupied strategic territories along the Red Sea coast in accordance with treaties signed with local African chieftains.

The colonial geo-political architecture that partitioned homogenous people elsewhere in Africa, divided the Afar people among the Abyssinian empire, as well as the French colony of Djibouti and even (consigned some) to another part of the Italian *Colonia Eritrea*, in which Afar have remained as marginalized but strategic minorities in the Horn Region.

Indeed, the Afar have been resisting any kind of invasion of their land for a long time. Their anti-colonial resistance can be traced back to the era of the Ottoman Turks' feeble influence over the islands in the Red Sea. The narrative of a scenario in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century by one of prominent Dahimela tribe chiefs, Sheikh Gumhed Deneba markedly demonstrates the strong anti-colonial resistance at the time:

About 200-300 Turkish garrisons set out from Mi'idar and reached to 'Aläti. They looted livestock from Ali'adawka sub-clan and we were waiting them (to join battle) in Ak'ali but we were later informed that they returned in a different direction ... we tried to follow them but to no avail. This was their typical character. They never dared to meet us [locals] let alone having any influence over us (cited in al-Shami/al-Shami 1997: 259).

Egyptians, who assumed power over the Red Sea islands after the Turkish withdrawal, had also faced resistance from the Afar. The 1875 'Odumi war between a Swiss adventurer, Governor of Massawa and the Awsa Sultan Mohammed Hanfare ('Illelta), was fought out in a place called 'Odumi or Lake Gemeri where there was armed resistance from several Afar against abortive ambitions of Egyptian khedive to control the Afarland, the gateway to highland Ethiopia.

Similar Afar resistances were carried out against the expansion of colonial power beyond those areas granted to them by the local chieftains. Colonial rulers' interference with the internal Afar affairs further aggravated their restlessness and led to frequent confrontations. In 1859, Henri Lambert, the French consul at Aden, who was sent to Tadjoura to assess the condition for the establish-

ment of colonial territory, was assassinated at the Gulf of Tadjoura (Adou 1993: 45-46). Furthermore, French colonialists faced strong resistance from the Sultanate of Awsa under Sultan Yayyo Mohammed and that of Goba'ad under Sultan Hummad Lo'ota who was later forced into exile and fled to Madagascar in 1931.

The peak of anti-colonial resistance culminated in the death of Sultan Yasin Haysema, the Sultan of Bidu in the war with Italy that lasted for six years (1925-1931) and the death of Hasenayti bera of the Gali'a tribe in the furious battles of Morhito with the French (Redo 1998: 36). The Afar carried on their struggles with the regional powers as well in order to restore their unity.

The Amhara's assumption that the Afar quest of regional autonomy was a claim for independence on one hand, and the separatist fronts' interpretation of the Afar pro-unity sentiment as a threat for their struggle on the other, together with the national identity struggle against the Issa-Somali, left the Afar subject to domination and marginalization in all the three Horn states they resided in.

## Afar vs. Ethiopia

Afar-Abyssinian relations can be traced back to the era of ancient Aksumite dominance over the port of Adulis,<sup>8</sup> a home for the 'Adolla tribe of coastal Afar, and a sea outlet for trade contacts with South Arabia, India, as well as the Byzantine and Roman empires.

Civil wars between the highland Christian empires and the multi-ethnic Muslim Emirate of Adal, in which the Afar had a major influence, significantly dominated the medieval history of Ethiopia. From the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the Adal Emirate's power declined and disintegrated due to various factors such as the Christian empires' political power expansion, the invasion of Afarland by Oromo expansionists and the control over islands on the Red Sea Coast by Turkish imperialists.

Despite the neighbouring highlanders' several attempts to intervene in the Afar affairs, traditional authorities ('Amoytas, Derders, Redantus, Momins and Makabantus) were relatively semi-independent leaders and representatives of their subjects. The Afar successively resisted extensive intrusion of their land by neighbouring highlanders, particularly by the two Abyssinian factions of the Amhara and Tigre. A glance at the history of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Tigray under Sehul Mika'el to the 21<sup>st</sup> century Tigray under

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8 The ancient port of Adulis in the Gulf of Zula located ca. 40 km to the south of Massawa was possibly frequented by the Aksumite kingdom during the Zenith of the Empire. Salt, gold, slaves and several other goods were passed and traded through Adulis. The Greek also controlled the port from 600 BC to 15 AD and gave it its name Adulis.

TPLF can clearly demonstrate the long lasting rivalry among the Afar and Tigre due to aggressive competition for economic resources and socio-political hegemony. Similarly, in 1895, Menilek's abortive invasion of the Sultanate of Awsa under Mohammed Hanfare (Illelta) at 'Arado was also an indication of the strong resistance among the Afar against interventions from the centre.

The Afar people had an independent traditional political system, which possessed clearly defined geographic boundaries. They had an overall control of trade activities and imposed tax on caravans carrying goods across the Afarland to and from the Red Sea (Adou 1993: 43). In the 1860s, while Kassa Mercha of Tigray, the future Emperor Yohannes IV, rebelled against Emperor Tewodros, he lived in exile among other places in Kala Ab'ala (northern Afar land) where the Herto leader Yakumi Sere' Ali assured him security against any threat from the highland. Similarly in 1916, the Awsean Sultan Yayyo Mohammed granted protection to Lej Eyasu during his escape from the Shoan leaders. These incidents could strongly support the claim that the Afar were independent in their areas.

In 1898, for the first time in Awsean history, the Afar invited the involvement of Shoan leaders in their internal affairs during the power struggle among the Illalta's (Mohammed Hanfare) family. Thereafter, in 1944 emperor Haile Sellasie was directly involved in the deposition, selection and appointment of Awsean sultans.

When a modern administrative system was introduced in Ethiopia after the Second World War, the Afarlands were partitioned into different governorate-generals that later weakened the Afar traditional administrative system. In 1961 after the termination of the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia, Afarland in Eritrea became the fifth division of the Afarland succeeding the previous partitions in four governorate-generals of Hararge, Shoa, Wallo and Tigray of the empire.

The 1961 Ti'o conference, in which 55 tribal chieftains from northern Dankalia participated, reached a general consensus regarding the urgency of a quest of the formation of an Afar autonomous governorate-general inside Ethiopia comprising those in Hararge, Shoa, Wallo, Tigray and Eritrea. Subsequently the Assab conference was held in 1963 and the decision was made to forward a petition to the emperor. The co-ordination of obtaining all the Afar tribal chiefs' signatures on the petition and forwarding it to the court of the Emperor was entrusted to Sheikh Yasin Mohamoda, who was the author and activist of the idea. It took him four solid years to complete his mission (Redo 1998: 38).

However, the dignitaries, elders, tribal chiefs and religious leaders who came to Addis Ababa in 1964 to plead with the emperor for the restoration of Afar unity, returned to their respective areas with no tangible outcome of their mission. A year later in 1965, extensive pressure for the restoration of Afar unity particularly from the Afar in Eritrea, the realisation of a potential

threat in the naming of the French Somaliland (FSL) and change-oriented students movements all over Ethiopia motivated Afar students in Addis Ababa who came from Wallo, Shoa, Hararge, Eritrea and the then FSL to take the initiative and organise themselves into the Afar Students Association (ASA).

This association played an instrumental role in nurturing a sense of belonging to each other among the students. It also played an undeniable role in raising their spirits and morale in support of their national identity (Redo 1998: 40). Around 1970, some members of the ASA who moved to Egypt in search of further educational opportunities played a major role in raising awareness of Afar national identity and organising the disintegrated Afar students in Cairo. On 2 November 1972 Afar students in Cairo formed the Afar Koborih Angoyya (AKA) meaning the Afar Mobilization Movement or the Movement for the Rallying of the Afar.

The main objective of the movement was to raise awareness of the Afar plight and rally concerned activists around a common cause (Mohamoda 2001: 1). Members of the AKA who reached Europe, particularly those in Berlin, teamed up with the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe and participated actively in the revolutionary struggle. Since its establishment in 1972, some elements of the AKA contacted the Sultanate of Awsa to associate their efforts for the cause of the Afar. Unfortunately, the traditional authorities were not ready to accept the offer till the revolution reached its peak in early 1974 and they felt threatened due to the stressful situation in the country.

The Sultan's cordial relation with Arab countries and neighbouring states forced the young Afar reformists to warmly welcome the Sultan's group despite a huge ideological difference between the two groups. Soon, a group comprised of the Sultan's son, Hanfare Ali Mirah and some leaders from AKA made a tour of duty in Somalia where the Sultan had a good contract at the time. The Afar guests were welcomed to the presidential palace in Mogadishu, villa Somalia, and were hosted by General Ahmed Suleiman, the then incumbent Minister of the Interior and Siyad Barre's son-in-law. The Afar group together with other resistance groups like the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) represented by Osman Salih Sabe was invited to take part in the military parade held in Kismayu, by which Somalia leaders portrayed themselves as 'Big Brother' for political movements in the region.

Though strong Afar would have meant an obstacle to the realisation of Greater Somalia as well as independent Eritrea, both Barre's government and Sabe's ELF blessed the Afar rebellion movement that seemed to support the 'enemy of my enemy' adage. After departing from Mogadishu, both AKA leaders and representatives from the traditional authorities held a conference in Berlin from 13-16 August 1974. The resolution of the conference declared the establishment of a tactical alliance among the two Afar groups and elected Hanfare Ali Mirah as the chairman of the alliance. Apart from the military wing, the political committee was commissioned with the duty of

designing a political programme and coordinates with other movements abroad. Accordingly, within few months, the first Afar military trainees were sent to Somalia and the radical leftist guideline of the newly born alliance was launched as well. The guideline that clearly condemned the Afar nomadic aristocracies, landed tribal chiefs and national bourgeois further widened the resentment between the young AKA members and traditional authorities.

In the meantime, during the demise of the imperial regime and the rise of the military junta with socialist ideology, the Derg representatives approached traditional leaders among the Afar. Accordingly, on 2 May 1975 a delegation of Afar tribal chiefs and notables (totalling sixty) from the Awsa, Ba'adu and Tigray areas arrived in Addis and lodged at the Ghion Hotel. For a week the Derg representatives as well as the Imam of Anwar Mosque addressed the delegates who were also taken to Arussi to have a look at the Chilalo agricultural project. On the afternoon of 8 May, Brigadier General Tafari Banti, Mengistu Haile Mariam and Lieutenant Colonel Atnafu Abate addressed the Afar delegates at the Grand Palace. They were told about the new revolutionary government's aims and policies that emphasised mainly the land reform as a tool to bring feudal autocratic rule to an end.

In fact, the Ethiopian revolution in the 1970s was a critical challenge particularly for the Awsean Sultan who had eventually cultivated cordial relations with the imperial family and become immensely wealthy after getting involved in the large-scale commercial farming in Awsa. The execution of 61 imperial ministers and high ranking military officials in November 1974 forced the shocked Sultan to cooperate with the reformist Afar youth. Apart from strengthening the military power of the alliance, the Sultan further propagated ideas and agitated the Afar against the new land reform.

Later on, the Derg sent a group (comprised of Lt/Colonel Tesfaye Welde Sellase, Lt/Colonel Assrat Desta, Major Mohammed Yasin, Major Wondirad Beyene and Aba-Biya Aba-Jobir) to Ayssaita. On 31 May 1975 in the presence of Sultan Ali Mirah the Derg members addressed the people about the new land reform bill and the philosophy of 'Ethiopia First'. After two days, on the night of 2 June 1975, Ali Mirah left Ayssaita for Djibouti. A day after the exile of the Sultan, on 3 June 1975, his son Hanfare declared the birth of the Afar Liberation Front (ALF). Immediately, armed dispute between the Afar and the Derg forces erupted. Many Afar youths were killed as a result of heavy fighting in that fortnight's war. Though it did not last long Ahmed Ali Mirah, the son of the Sultan, led the military wing of ALF that continued guerrilla attacks particularly on the road connecting Addis to the port city of Assab.

The Afar force, after staying nine months in the Mogadishu training camp withdrew from Somalia. They first went to Aden by plane and then to the Afar Coasts in the Red Sea shores using ELF boats. Of the forces, a handful of them

joined the newly born ALF of the Sultan while the majority of trained fighters infiltrated the Afarland in Ethiopia and undertook guerilla attacks.

The last fight was undertaken in 1976 when the Derg military force led by Habib Mohamed Yayyo<sup>9</sup> launched a military operation against the Afar fighters in a place called Do'oroita.<sup>10</sup> During the Do'oroita operation the Derg forces found documents written in Amharic, Arabic and English from which the Derg learnt that this segment of Afar fighters (the AKA group) was a left-ist movement rather than the military wing of the Sultan. Soon afterwards the Derg negotiated with leaders of the AKA group, now reorganised as the Afar National Liberation Movement (ANLM) and convinced them that the Derg would give a final answer in the quest of nationalities. In a little while, the National Democratic Revolution Programme (NDRP) with definite provisions to settle the issue of nationality in Ethiopia was declared on 20 April 1976. The fifth chapter of the NDR programme states:

The right to self-determination of all nationalities will be recognized and fully respected. No nationality will dominate another one since the history, culture, language and religion of each nationality will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism. The unity of Ethiopian nationality will be based on their common struggle against feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism and all reactionary forces. This incited struggle is based on the desire to construct a new society based on equality, brotherhood and mutual respect (PMAC-NDRP April 1976).

ANLM leadership recognised the significance of this programme as an important step towards the solution of the nationality question, terminated the armed struggle and joined the revolution. ANLM declared its decision at the Munich conference in August 1976 stating that:

Now that the program of the Ethiopian National Democratic Revolution has recognized the inalienable right of all Ethiopians, the Afar people have resolutely joined the mainstream of the struggle of the oppressed masses and are determined to make all the sacrifices necessary in order to make the on-going revolution [a] total success (ANLM Guideline Aug. 1976).

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9 Habib Mohammed Yayyo is the son of Sultan Mohammed Yayyo who inherited the Awsean sultanate from his father 'Daddas' Yayyo in 1927 and was later ousted from his throne and succeeded by Sultan Ali Mirah in 1944. Habib belatedly joined the mid 1970s Ethiopian revolution that guaranteed the decline of Sultan Ali Mirah's regime. As a result the Derg appointed him to lead the military force campaign against AKA fighters who were initially considered by the Derg as remnants of the Awsean feudal authorities.

10 Do'oroita is a place in the Afar region of Ethiopia near Elidar. After the Afar forces blasted two bridges about 10 km from Elidar that cut off the Addis-Assab main road the Derg sent a military force led by Habib Mohammed Yayyo that resulted in casualties on both sides. Among the Afar fighters four died at the front each of them coming from different provinces for whose reunification the ANLM struggled.

Thus, ANLM became the sole ethnic-based political organisation that joined the revolution. Moreover, ANLM succeeded in organising the first pan-Afar-conference in the town of Gewane from 8-15 April 1977, in which more than 500 participants representing all the five Afar regions in Ethiopia including observers from the TFAI Afar political parties<sup>11</sup> took part.

The resolution of the conference condemned the political administrative structure in Ethiopia, characterized the country as 'prison of nation and nationalities' and strongly criticized extremist groups, who regarded themselves as the guardians of Ethiopian unity, on the one hand and the separatist thesis sympathizers on the other. The pan-Afar-conference called, among other things, for the realisation of a regional autonomy that comprised all the Afar in a single administrative structure.

However, similar to its predecessors, the Derg could not offer instant solutions and rather promised to establish a responsible government organ that would make a detailed study of the quest for the Ethiopia nation and nationalities.

Though it was too late, the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities was established in March 1983 to find solutions to problems resulting from the Ethiopians' extreme ethnic diversity. However, the Derg kept aside research outcomes and policy recommendations from the institute till the internal political crises seriously challenged the Derg's power. As a result, the long-awaited but short-lived Afar self administration under the Assab Autonomous Region was established in 1988. This included around 60% of the Afarland and was regarded by some as a step forward for the struggle of Afar unity while others viewed it simply as a security measure taken by the Derg in order to detach the Afar coastal lands from separately established autonomous regions of Eritrea.

After the demise of the Derg regime in May 1991, the Assab autonomous region was dissolved and its leadership withdrawn from the government political arena and Sultan Ali Mirah's ALF appeared on the scene of the Afar politics.

Hanfare Ali Mirah had participated in the London Peace Conference held from 27-28 of May 1991. As an ally with the EPRDF, the ALF leaders accompanied the EPRDF leadership on their trip to Addis Ababa<sup>12</sup> and attended the so-called National Conference held at the African Hall from 1-5 July 1991 represented by Sultan Ali Mirah. On 8 December 1991 the Afar Regional Council elected the Sultan's other son, Habib Ali Mirah as the president of the region. Later on it was declared that the ALF had won the 1992 regional elections.

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11 During the April 8-15, 1977 Gewane conference, the then TFAI political organizations, MPL and UNI had sent some observers to participate in the first pan-Afar-conference in the Horn of Africa.

12 'Hanfare and Males Zanawy (Zenawi) become good friends. They took the same flight to Addis Ababa after EPRDF forces controlled the city' (Kadafo n.d.: 80).

It was almost a decade and half later that the traditional authorities of Awsa came back to their throne though it was for short time. Since the 1970s ANLM had successfully won the support of the Afar including those in Awsa. Soon after, the ALF's struggle became practically paralysed and its leadership (the Sultan and his sons) remained in Saudi Arabia where the TPLF contacted them in early 1990s at the end of their search for an Afar organisation capable of accompanying the new rulers.

Indeed, it was difficult to envisage how the TPLF leaders with Albanian-type Communist ideology had chosen to work together with the Saudi-type monarchical leadership of the ALF. Major differences between the two parties were further confirmed by the ALF's press release that states: 'Despite our difference on major issues such as TPLF preposterous claim the Afar's land in Tigray province as their own and not as an integral part of the Afara region.' Then it continued to find an excuse, 'but when TPLF changed their isolationist policy and decided to work with other oppressed nationalities of Ethiopia ... we agreed to establish a federal state with all Afar people in one region'. Nevertheless, ALF's press release contained not a single word about the fact that the 'Afar unity' they brought together with the TPLF leadership was the one that furthest partitioned Afar under the two national flags of Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Unfortunately for the ALF and as calculated by the TPLF, the honeymoon between the leftist TPLF and the royalist ALF soon deteriorated. Interference in the internal administration system of the region by the security forces, intelligence, and representatives of transitional government fuelled the discontent.<sup>13</sup> The ALF leadership explained their justification for the divorce of the imbalanced marriage with the TPLF with:

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13 There were many incidents of direct fighting conducted between ALF and TPLF forces. In 1991, soon after the fall of the Derg regime, both the EPRDF and ALF forces were stationed in different camps through the Afar region. In the interior portion of the region in which ALF soldiers were dominantly present, there were no EPRDF soldiers with the exception of some Tigrean settlers surrounding the large scale government owned agricultural projects organised as a peace and stability committee. One of the committee members Mr Hadgu who was head of the Det Bahiri Agricultural Project killed an Afar due to a personal quarrel and the Afar instantly killed Mr Hadgu. TPLF soldiers opened fire against the Afar which forced ALF soldiers in the area to fight on the side of the people. This immediately escalated the situation into an armed dispute among the Afar and Tigre resulting in many casualties. After six months another dispute erupted in Gewane town between Afar and Tigre traders, in which the TPLF forces stationed in the town attacked the Afar, which again forced ALF forces, who were in Lower Gewane at the time, to support them. Additional TPLF forces from Awash Arba Military Camp moved to Gewane and massacred any Afar they met in the town including Djiboutian citizens who were in the hotel. Many interviewed Afar still regretfully recognised the Gewane massacre as revenge by the TPLF forces for Tigreans killed at the Det Bahiri conflict.

TPLF leaders mistakenly still believe that an economically strong Tigray cannot be established without incorporating the fertile land and resource-rich areas within Tigray region. In order to realize this hidden agenda, TPLF leaders have two objectives, namely to govern the Afar people by establishing a puppet political organization as well as to destroy ALF and the Afar people's traditional institution.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, in May 1994 the TPLF succeeded not only in disintegrating the ALF at a party level but also in penetrating deeply and creating a division between the two sons of Ali Mirah, the old ally, Hanfare as leader of the ALF1 and the younger son Omar as leader of the ALF2. The split of the ALF paved the way for the TPLF cadres to bring in their handmade APDO into the political scene of the region. In the elections of August 1995, it was declared that the APDO won the majority of seats<sup>15</sup> but Hanfare was the one elected as the president of the new regional government.

However, he held the position from August 1995 to March 1996 till the regional council sacked him in his absence.<sup>16</sup> The APDO chairman and a former TPLF's militia, Ismail Ali Siro, succeeded the regional president Hanfare Ali Mirah, son of the Awsean Sultan and a political science graduate from a University in the USA. The EPRDF considered Ismail to be a 'revolutionary democrat', a leader who could shoulder the responsibility of realising socio-economic transformations of the Afar society with better competence than any other of the Afar political elites. On the other hand, political observers in the region who were interviewed claimed that Ismail's sole qualification for office was loyalty in addition to his ability to speak Tigrigna.

The APDO is an organisation created by the TPLF in its own image in order to counter the Afar resistance during the era of its struggle in the 1970s and 1980s. The traditional hostility among the northern Afar with their neighbouring Tigreans is reflected in the modern day politics that led the Afar to a resistance front named Ugugumo<sup>17</sup> in order to defend itself against the TPLF attacks.

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14 ALF Press Point Paper. online: <<http://www.arhotabba.com/alf.html>>, accessed 21.12.2006.

15 In the 1995 elections, APDO won twenty-three out of forty-eight seats in the regional council and three out of eight seats in the federal parliament. Ali Mirah's ALF that had a lion share in the 1992 elections won only twelve out of forty-eight seats in the regional council and three out of eight seats in the House of People's Representatives.

16 Hanfare Ali Mirah was in the United States whilst the regional council declared his deposition from the regional presidential position. Many Afar regarded this action as a typical TPLF's exit strategy for an old ally.

17 Ugugumo literally means 'revolution'. The word itself was newly developed in the mid 1970s in Somalia while the ANLM forces were receiving military training and intensive political orientation. Many more new words together with the Dimis-Redo Latin script for the Afar language were prepared then. Thereafter the name Ugugumo was initially used by the

Since the 1978 bloodshed at Berahle, TPLF fighters have conducted several military campaigns in the northern Afarlands. It was the first TPLF attack against the northern Afar. The armed confrontation between the TPLF fighters and the Afar of Berahle, popularly known as 'Arba'a 'Eybi (The Wednesday War) arose whilst the Afar denied TPLF forces the use of the Berahle route on their way to Beda to attack the ELF force camped at As'ale. Fifteen Afar were killed including respected elders like Sheikh Miftah Kadier, Ahmed Elama Baho, Ali Mohammed Ali and the ten year old boy Abdu Samed Abdu Aliyu. The second and third major armed confrontations resulted in casualties on both sides taking place in Berahle, which later led Afar youth to organise their forces under the name Ugugumo (uprising or revolution) in 1981. After receiving military training in both the Derg and ELF fields, various groups of Ugugumo fighters met in Sari'e, a locality in Berahle and decided to conduct a guerilla attack against the TPLF and EPLF forces. Since then Ugugumo has never put down its weapons. Thousands of Afar youths under Ugugumo have lost their life in the struggle against the two Tigrigna dominated fronts, EPLF and TPLF.

The northern ALF was also a major armed organisation; initially supported by the Eritrean fronts and mobilized in northern Afar, it later gave a hard time to the EPLF ally, the Tigray Liberation Movement. Unlike the southern ALF (Ali Mirah's), the northern ALF that was later renamed the Afar National Liberation Front (ANLF) could not accept the EPLF-TPLF's Eritrean independence formula that would split the Ethiopian Afar into two different states.

In 1979, the northern ALF was conceived by Sheikh Hussein Ahmed Mussa, a former ANLM official who left the ANLM as a result of dissatisfaction with the Derg's reluctance to respond to the Afar quest of self-administration despite its promise in the 1976 NDR programme. On 23 March 1983, the northern ALF leaders Sheikh Hussein, Salih Abdilla, Ahmed Ibrahim, Ahmed Mohammed Wilis and others held a conference in Yemen where they declared the political programme of the party with the ultimate goal of restoring the unity of Afar in Ethiopia and sharing appropriate power in the centre. Since both the northern ALF and the EPLF had a common denominator, the Derg as a foe, the EPLF offered military and logistical support to the northern ALF. Later on, at the end of 1980s, the TPLF negotiated with the northern ALF to persuade them to cooperate with the newly created coalition of Ethiopian opposition groups. However, as the northern ALF was insisting that the TPLF forces should not operate inside Afarlands and critically opposed the separation of the Afar in Eritrea from their brethren in Ethiopia, the TPLF politicians chose to find another organisation that could be regarded as the Afar representative in the TPLF-led coalition.

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Afar who voluntarily left ELF and organized as a militia around Tio with the support of the Derg government.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the international order changed dramatically. The Marxist-Leninist TPLF was in a hurry to immerse itself in Western ideology and to engage internally in fabricating 'democratic organisations' (DOs) of diverse ethnicity in Ethiopia. However, it was difficult for the TPLF cadres who had an Afar partition plan in their pocket, to form an Afar 'DO' political party among the Afar who demanded full and genuine regional autonomy. That's why the TPLF was forced to deal with the ALF of Sultan Ali Mirah, thereby taking a calculated risk in order to fill the power vacuum in Afar areas for a short time till the APDO reached 'manhood'.

After immense manoeuvring and pressure including intimidation, the TPLF succeeded in bringing the Afar people's 'DO' on the political scene in the region in 1995. According to some founding members of the Tigray Afar Democratic Organisation (TADO), who want their names to remain anonymous, the majority of the former TADO and the now APDO founding members were Afar kids and youths who were not (yet) capable of grasping the political situation in the area. Some youth joined the TPLF because they were attracted by the musical fanfare of the Woyane band. In addition to this, some Afar girls who wanted to escape from family arranged marriages also joined the TPLF. There were also a few Afar youth who initially provided food and information from the Afar villages for the TPLF fighters and later got promoted to the militia.

Initially the TPLF fighters gathered all those kids and youth in their camp in Indelo (in Wahadis kebele of Kuneba Woreda) and sent them to 'Bet Temeherti Woyane' (the School of Woyane), located around Tekeze Bridge, in order to mould them into members of the TPLF. Eventually, younger kids were transferred to 'Bet Temeherti Martha' (Martha School) in Angereb near the Sudan border, while relatively older ones were sent for military training to Wer'ei. Later on, in March 1987, when the Ugugumo forces challenged TPLF's presence in the Afarland and a series of negotiations with ANLF had failed, the TPLF leadership decided to upgrade and organise those Afar youths within TPLF as an Afar organisation by the name TADO. After six months, the TPLF leadership eliminated the word Tigray from the name of the organisation and renamed it APDO. However, this could not help to transform the APDO into a 'manhood' party capable of handling the Afar politics during the 1991 change of regime. The TPLF blamed the APDO for its lack of success and searched for help and found it in the ALF of Sultan Ali Mirah. The TPLF was, at this stage, in need of the ALF's alliance to set foot in the Afar area, an endeavour that would have been difficult without such support.

The TPLF never rested on their laurels, they further cleared the path for the APDO by eliminating potential threats from other rival organisations. Primarily the Ugugumo leader, Muhyadin Miftah was imprisoned in Djibouti in August 1995 and handed over to Ethiopia. Subsequently other

Ugugumo leaders including Hamid Omar, Ali Abdullah, and Ali Mohammed joined the regional politics led by the APDO. The majority of the leadership of the northern ALF (renamed as ANLF) also took part in regional politics. Later on, other parties including the ALF and the ANDM,<sup>18</sup> generally all Afar political organisations formed a coalition party, the ANDP.<sup>19</sup>

However, putting all political organisations into one basket never stopped the emergence of 'new' parties as was intended. The best example is the unfinished business regarding Ugugumo. After Muhyadin Miftah's handing over to the TPLF-led Ethiopian government he was imprisoned at Mekele till the TPLF officials reached an agreement with the Ugugumo leadership on the front to a cease-fire. Accordingly, about 400 fighters disarmed and returned to their 'peaceful' life which brought an end to the first Ugugumo. Thereafter, Mohamoda Ahmed Gaas, one of the former ANLM leadership, ex-secretary of the workers party of Ethiopia for Assab Autonomous Region, a founder of ARDU in Djibouti in July 1991 and an incumbent State Minister of Culture and Tourism of Ethiopia established a coalition front with the Ugugumo with the name ARDUF and became its representative in Europe. Soon after Mohamoda came back to Ethiopia, he succeeded in disarming the second group of Ugugumo who returned to peaceful lives. Nevertheless the remaining fighters led by Salih Ali Hudale announced that there was still another active remnant group of the Ugugumo and accused Mohamoda of foisting tribalism on the Afar and bartering for their cause for the sake of position. Later on, Salih Ali Hudale's group lay down their arms and established a new political party named the ANRDF, which is a registered political party in the National Election Board of Ethiopia, on 17 February 2005. But still a fourth group of Ugugumo led by Arab Abdilla Mussa continues fighting.

Another abortive political party named the ANMDG also showed up in the political scene of the Afar region for a short time. The founders and leaders of the ANMDG, Rashid Salih, Mohammed Thayb and Mohammed Osman were young Afar students at the Ethiopian Civil Service College with little or no practical experience of political life at the national or regional

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18 The ANDM was established in 1994 and participated in the 1995 regional elections. Ahmed Mohamed Ahaw, the son of the Sultana of Bidu, was the figure who spawned the organization but later disappeared from the regional politics. The ANDM was among those organizations, which created the coalition ANDP, its leadership Mohammed Yoyyo, Hassan Mohammed, Mohammed Bolko Ali Mohammed Salih (Ali Muhamdis) and Mohammed Awal Me'i have key positions in the regional political life under the ANDP.

19 In the May 2000 elections, the ANDP won all the seats (eight) in the federal parliament and won 84 out of 87 seats in the regional council and left the remaining 3 seats for the Argoba People's Democratic Movement, which represented the Argoba Special Wereda within the Afar region.

level. Thanks to the ANDP phobia against accommodating Afar elites, the ANMDG was able to win the support of educated Afar youth who felt neglected by the ruling ANDP in the region.

Though the political programme of the organisation clearly stipulated that the ANMDG would be a more loyal ally to the EPRDF than the ruling ANDP leadership, the EPRDF rejected the adoption quest raised by the new party. One of the senior advisors of the Prime Minister, Abay Tsehaye, urged the dissolution of the new party to the leaders of the ANMDG by saying, the 'EPRDF will never give birth to twins, and in case it happens, we will never raise both'.

Accordingly, the ANMDG leadership accused the regional government of abusing their members by dismissing them from their education and workplace. They further blamed the federal election board for giving confidential documents like the political party members' full profile to the regional government. At last with the order of the EPRDF and with a little pinching from the regional government, the ANMDG leaders agreed to dissolve their infant party and signed a protocol in the hall of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs on which occasion Minister Hassan Abdullah represented the ANDP and those youth at the leadership level of ANMDG became members of the ruling ANDP.

### Afar vs. Eritrea

In Eritrea, the Afar inhabited islands and coastal areas of the Red Sea that stretched from the northern tip of the Boori peninsula to the Djibouti border of Obock in the southern edge of the Rahayeta sultanate territory.

From the renowned Kingdom of Adal established in Rahayeta, the kingdoms of Dankali and Ankala, the Sultanate of Bidu and other major clan chieftains and sheikdoms successively dominated the traditional administration on the Red Sea coasts, in the interiors and on the islands as well. Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Turks had controlled the Red Sea coastal areas with a minimal influence over the territories. The Ottoman rule transferred its nominal authority over the coasts and islands of the Red Sea to the Egyptian Khedive in 1866 but didn't last long. It was after only three years, on 15 November 1869, that the Ankala chiefs, Sultan Ibrahim Ahmed and Sultan Hassan Ahmed signed an agreement with Giuseppe Sapetto, representative of Societa Rubattino Company on the Nasser Majid ship, in which the future *Colonia Eritrea* was first conceived as the piece of land in Assab possessed by the Italian company.

Soon afterwards, on 10 March 1882, the Rubattino company transferred all its landholdings to the Italian government and later, on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1882, the Italian King Umberto declared the land the *Colonia di Assab* which later grew

up to *Colonia Eritrea* after Italian colonists had entered Asmara in 1889 without any notable opposition.

Unlike its predecessors, the colonial powers of Turkey and Egypt, the Italian colony penetrated to the interior portions of the area which led them to direct confrontation with local Afar chieftains. In the late 1920s, armed resistance led by the courageous Sultan of Bidu, Yasin Haysma, became a seed for Afar nationalism planted in the minds of the Afar youth. Particularly the banner raised by an Afar nationalist Yasin Mohamoda, who was the namesake of Yasin Hysama, became a long-standing symbol in the struggles for Afar unity.

The Afar in Eritrea consider the era of Italian colonialism as a buffer that constrained the age-old traditional administrative system. Colonial boundaries for the Afar meant an artificial fence between brethren rather than a conceptual tool for nation-state building as advocated particularly by the Tigrigna speakers of Eritrea who proudly claimed 'to have little in common with their kin across the Mereb River'.<sup>20</sup>

After the British expelled Italy from its East African Colony, *Africa Orientale Italiana*, the post World War II political life of Eritrea was impeded by the bi-polar highland-lowland (Kebesa-Barka) and Christian-Muslim dichotomies while the Afar were 'pre-occupied with their own destiny' (Mohamoda 2001: 5). At the March 1949 UN conference in New York, the Muslim and lowlander Afar represented by the late Fitawrari Yasin Mohamoda, voted for the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia.

In fact, no one dares to claim that there were no Afar who participated in the 30 year long independence war of Eritrea. But without doubt, the role played by the Afar in the independence struggle was minimal compared with those who opposed it.

Indeed, the Muslim-dominated ELF (Arabic: jabha) that was established in 1960 mainly by Beni Amer students with the support of the Mirgani families of Kassala was able to absorb many of the Afar fighters. Especially after the eastern coast of Massawa Muslims led by Utman Salih Sabi joined with the front in the mid 1960s, the ELF eventually recruited east coastal Muslim Afar who were disappointed with the imperial government's reluctance to respond to the Afar quest of self-administration.<sup>21</sup>

However, the ELF leadership was dominated by western Muslims 'who always dreamed of controlling the Afar coastal line' (Adou 1993: 57), accused

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<sup>20</sup> Negash/Tronvoll 2000: 10, as quoted in Mohamoda 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Afar involved in the ELF have defected and gone back to their normal life at different times since the late 1960s. The majority of the returnees regrouped themselves and fought back against the Eritrean movements. The Ara'ata Uggumo, Dukuhina and Al Wahida were among those groups reorganized by the support of the Derg government.

the Afar of pro-unity sentiment and became suspicious of the dominance of Afar fighters in the fields. For this reason they alienated the Afar from leadership positions. Furthermore, some disputes started to occur between the fighters and the Afar people. Consequently in 1967, Afar fighters of the ELF requested to operate only within Afar areas in order to halt the Tigrean fighters' abuse and harassment of the Afar people. This quest, however, led to disagreement and ended-up with the eruption of armed conflict between the Afar and Tigre lowlanders within the ELF, in which the latter were defeated and withdrew from the Afar region of Eritrea till their renaissance in the late 1970s.

The continuation of western Muslims hegemony over the front led some of the leadership like Osman Salih Sabe and Hiruy Tadla Bayru to establish a new movement called the People's Liberation Front (PLF) that later, in the early 1970s became the EPLF. The infant EPLF, mainly dominated by the Christian highlander Tigreans, took advantage of the dispute among the Afar and ELF forces in order to freely mobilize its forces in the Afarland of Eritrea (Dankalia), of course with Afar consent.<sup>22</sup>

As the EPLF forces became strong due to the mass influx of young Christian Tigreans into the front, the highlander domination in the leadership led to further division in which Sabi's PLF split off from the EPLF and formed a coalition named the ELF-PLF.

In 1980, the Afar joined another battle against the ELF and forced them out of Dankalia once and for all, similar military action taken by the Derg pushed the ELF further back, deep into the western interiors from where both the Christian dominated EPLF and the TPLF joined forces and pushed the ELF forces into Sudan. The ELF never recovered from this defeat.

Despite religious and geographical differences among Eritrean movements, all groups have a common denominator that is seeing the Afar pro-unity notion as a threat for their independence struggle. Hence they have designed a strategy to control the Afar coasts and to make the Afar powerless. As a result many prominent Afar leaders and fighters involved in the ELF and EPLF were assassinated.

But the assassinations of the Afar fighters in the field become counter productive. It distanced the Afar from the fronts, reinforced the Afar sense of injustice ... thus all Eritrean fronts lost ground in Dankalia and were gradually driven out of the region.<sup>23</sup>

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22 Sidiha Ela in the Dankalia desert is the birthplace of the EPLF. The embryonic and weak EPLF forces were initially camped at Sidiha Ela from where their military power built-up.

23 For details on the few known cases of prominent Afar leaders and fighters assassinated by ELF and EPLFF forces, see Adou 1993: 54-58.

Until the EPLF rebellion which made them the new rulers of Eritrea, the Afar were rejoicing in the long awaited administrative autonomy. However, soon after the overthrow of the Derg in May 1991, the Afar in the newly born Eritrea were subjected to the authoritarian rule of the EPLF. The highland Christian dominated leadership reasserted its hegemony over different nationalities in Eritrea to the extent of changing the names of Afar villages to Tigrigna names. The EPLF that in February 1994 renamed itself the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) further partitioned the Dankalia region of the Afar into the Southern Zoba (district) and Northern Red Sea Zoba, in which all the supreme administrative positions are held by Tigrigna speakers.

The PFDJ with its one-state policy struggles to create a new-brand of Eritrean nationalism with no or little understanding of diversity. 'Ethnic affiliation is discouraged except during the annual display of festivals in Asmara' (Mohamoda 2001: 6). The Eritrean government's view on the Amhara's style of ethnic assimilation policy is 'molding the eight nationalities of Eritrea in the shape of the ninth Tigrigna speaking ethnic group, which is simply a transformation of heterogeneity into homogeneity by force of decree' (Redo 1998: 50).

The Eritrean government's ill-conceived strategy to alienate the Afar in Eritrea from their brethren in Ethiopia and Djibouti is reflected by the PFDJ action of changing the Latin-scripts of the Afar alphabets used for decades among the Afar people across the Horn region.

The government in Asmara further conducted a joint military attack against the Afar political movements together with the neighbouring governments of the TPLF-led Ethiopia and Issa-dominated Djibouti. The EPLF Marine and ground fighters played a major role in dismantling the Afar opposition, the FRUD, during the civil war in Djibouti in the early 1990s. Moreover, the EPLF-TPLF joint military campaign was conducted in Beda against the Ugugumo fighters.<sup>24</sup>

Prior to the Ethio-Eritrean conflict in 1992, the Asmara government had opened a consulate office that was 'intended to monitor the situation from close by in Ayssaita, the then capital of the Afar region of Ethiopia' (Mohamoda 2001: 5).

All these autocratic and military repressions by the EPLF over the Afar people led tens of thousands of Afar to flee Eritrea to neighbouring Djibouti, Yemen and Ethiopia. In 1991, the first year of the EPLF control of Eritrea, more than 5000 Afar escaped from the suppression of the EPLF's totalitarian administration and fled to Ethiopia from different localities in Dankalia. Afar youths from Beku'Buye (led by Osman Mohammed Derder), from Hal-Hal

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24 See letters exchanged between President Issaias Afwerki and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi on 16 and 25 August 1997.

(led by Mohammed Hussein), from Murayum Sagem (led by Ma'ar Mussa and Gaas Asir Ma'o), from 'Ayumen (led by Sahlu Gumhed Sahlu), from Abe (led by Ahmed Humad Igahel) and many others from different areas were able to cross the border to Ethiopia where they were warmly welcomed by their clansmen.

Representatives from each group contacted the TPLF officials at Mekele, including the ex-president of the Tigray region Gebru Asserat, and clearly explained their decision to commence armed struggle against the authoritarian government in Asmara. However, the TPLF officials, who themselves were divided concerning the decision of the EPLF, could not assist the Afar other than advising them to 'wait and see'. Indeed, other oppositions of the Eritrean government like the EDM (DEMHA'E) and the ELF-CC (SAGEM) were in those days allowed to operate in Ethiopia as part of the so-called 'peaceful struggle'.

Until the field-marriage between the EPLF and the TPLF broke up and Afar of Dankalia, after having been crowned by both groups in Asmara-Addis Palaces, fled to the Ethiopian border they were undertaking clandestine hit and run attacks against the EPLF forces. However, when the traditional 'Agame-Hamasen' superficial dichotomy reached its climax, the TPLF officials reorganised Afar oppositions and offered them military, logistic, political and financial support to strengthen the armed struggle against the EPLF.<sup>25</sup>

Accordingly, a provisional coordinating committee led by A. Osman Maer was established in 1997. This was followed on 17 October 1998 by the Ab'ala conference in which the birth of the RSADO was announced. The TPLF leaders including Gebru Assrat, Tsegaye Berhe and the Afar regional officials Mohammed Awal and Mohammed Kedier (Anbeta) were among the participants of the Ab'ala conference in which they promised to support the RSADO, whose naming followed the style of typical TPLF fabricated 'Do' groups.

In the first RSADO conference held on 26 January 1999 in Ab'ala, Afar youth who were studying in the Ethiopian Civil Service College joined the organisation at the invitation of the founders.<sup>26</sup> Among them the second year

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25 Similarly, after the Ethio-Eritrean conflict, the EPLF officials attempted to include Afar in the TPLF opposition block that was organised with the support of Asmara. The Afar group led by the former ANLF leader Idris Kheir and the two sons of Sultan Ali Miraah, Habib and Omar did not take long to break-up their short honeymoon in the Asmara palace. Accordingly, Idris Khier and Habib Ali Mirah went back to Ethiopia while Omar Ali Mrah left Asmara for London.

26 Initially invitations were offered to veteran Afar politicians of Eritrean origin who either rejected the offer or the TPLF officials abandoned them. Soon afterwards, freshmen and Sophomore Afar students of Eritrean origin at the Ethiopia Civil Service College were

economics student Ibrahim Harun was elected as the vice chairman of the RSADO, who later succeeded the chairman, the late Said Ali.

The military wing of the RSADO that received training in Ethiopia started sporadic guerrilla attacks in different localities of the Dankalia region of Eritrea. Nevertheless, following the June 2000 Algiers peace agreement between the government of Ethiopia and Eritrea, the assistance that had flowed from the Ethiopian government to the RSADO declined and even froze for a time. Subsequent to the mid 2001 split among the TPLF leadership, the backers of anti-EPLF movements, including military and security advisors for the RSADO, were found to be some of the radical old leaders of TPLF who were ousted from their position both in the government as well as at party level by the 'moderate' bloc of the prime minister.

In 2003, the RSADO, for the first time, joined the Eritrean Democratic Alliance, which is an umbrella association for the Eritrean oppositions established in Khartoum on 26 January 1998. The RSADO leadership initially put forward the concept of nation and the nationalities' right to self determination, including the right to secession, as the criteria to allow oppositions to join the alliance, which according to other Eritrean nationalist movements' perspective portrayed the young generation of Afar as anti-Eritrean independents who would like to restore Afar unity within Ethiopia like the case had been advocated by Afar politicians in the 1950s.<sup>27</sup>

Though controversy remains, member organisations in the Eritrean Democratic Alliance and the RSADO compromised and approved an amendment in article 1 of the political charter of the alliance that states:

We shall ensure that Eritrean nationalists and nationals have the right to self determination founded on principles of equality and mutual respect (Art. 1, No. 3).

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found to be the ideal material for the Dankalia fighters' search for Afar elites and the TPLF officials' speculation over veteran Afar politicians.

27 The RSADO precondition, announced at the fifth EDA conference held at Ghion Hotel in Addis Ababa, was firmly opposed by the ELF-RC. Later, Mesfen Hagos, the former Defence Minister and cofounder of EPLF joined the stand of the ELF-RC group. Meanwhile, due to the intervention of the TPLF's Sebehat Nega in negotiating between the two groups, the RSADO accepted the withdrawal of the phrase 'the right to secession', likewise, the ELF-RC accepted the inclusion of 'the right to self determination' in the charter. This, however, led the ELF-RC to split, and the group led by Ahmed Nasser and Dr Beyne Kidane founded the new ELF-NC while the radical group of the late Seyum 'Uqebe Michale continued with their stand in the ELF-RC. Recently, the EDA, which held its congress in Addis Ababa in February 2007, amended some articles in the political charter (ethnic group rights for self-determination) together with the controversial article that confers religious groups the right to govern themselves according to their religious teachings.

The RSADO has a thirty-minute radio transmission programme, three days per week in Ethiopian radio broadcasting from Addis Ababa and another thirty-minute programme, two days per week broadcasting by the voice of Woyane at Mekele. The EDA (perhaps supported by the Sana'a Forum) is funding the Radio programme broadcasting in Arabic, Tigrigna, Kunama and Afar languages.

### Concluding remarks

Afar traditional chiefs had initially granted pieces of land on the coasts of the Red Sea to European 'guests' who later became colonial masters. Ultimately, the egalitarian Afar society underwent a long-lasting anti-colonial resistance that however, did not spare the Afar from being partitioned among three different states in the African Horn.

Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Afar have been preoccupied with the long and tiresome struggle to restore their borderless unity. The 1952 federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia and the realisation of the long-awaited Assab autonomous region were among the major episodes over the last half-century in which the Afar dream of having an influence in matters affecting them in their respective countries seemed to have been realised.

On the other hand the Afar dissatisfaction with the imperial and the Derg governments due to their reluctance to respond to the Afar quest of self-determination as well as the early 1990s radical change in the international political order that brought the fall of the Derg regime and the assumption of power by opposition rebels who practically split the Afar of Ethiopia into two different political geographical entities, were among the major factors that made the Afar struggle for self-determination and balanced politico-economical power appear like sharing a broken dream.

Though the federal system in Ethiopia enables the Afar to establish their own regional administration, the past 15 years of practical experience did not alter the Afar position on the waiting list of development. Challenges like establishing due priority for political stability on both regional and federal levels, frequent intervention and control from the centre, regional administrative incompetence to implement development policies and their unwillingness to absorb Afar elites have severely hampered the much-talked about self-determination.

On the other hand, rampant corruption and tribalism, the mushrooming of inter- and intra-ethnic conflicts, a developing dependency attitude, loss of grazing and agricultural lands due to ill-conceived 'development' interventions, the large scale settlement of immigrants who will soon outnumber the natives, aggressive resource exploitation and rapid spread of epidemic dis-

eases like HIV/AIDS are eroding the Afar claims on self-administration and are gradually becoming a potential threat for the survival of the Afar as a nation.

Forlornly, the Afar in the newly born Eritrea are trapped in a situation, which is the worst of all tragedies. The EPLF/PFDJ led Eritrean authoritarian government's 'Hade hzbi Hade lebi'-motto (meaning one nation one heart), forced thousands of Afar youth either to flee to neighbouring Ethiopia, Djibouti and Yemen or to bear the unfair burden of the new Tigrigna-highlander political as well as socio-economic hegemony.

As discussed briefly through the biography of the Afar political orientation, no single movement proclaimed to be a nightmare to regional states by claiming the establishment of a sovereign nation as its ultimate goal. Again there is not yet an Afar political organisation that threatens the interest of the West by claiming an independent nation of 'Greater Afar', which would become a member state in the Arab league by conceptualizing the ancestral linkage with the neighbouring Arabs. Nevertheless, all the Afar political movements for half a century have a common denominator that is the realisation of Afar self-determination in all the states they inhabit. They are united in trying to send the following messages: no more domination via assimilation, and no more symbolic self-determination. The Eritrean EPLF/PFDJ should accommodate the concept of multiculturalism by accepting ethnic diversity as a national blessing rather than seeing it as a burden; and the EPRDF of Ethiopia should avert its pre-empt tactic of sponsoring and patronising the so-called ethnic based organisations and should practice a genuine decentralization and democracy that could accommodate the young elites. International organisations, NGOs and other stakeholders should also play an increasingly active as well as timely role before violence begets more violence.

Generally, the totalitarian rule in Eritrea and illusions of self-determination that might be a potential threat to the survival of the root of the Afar nation in federalist Ethiopia may drive the strategic minority of the Afar to join the desperate journey of the Somali in the Horn region which in turn would have repercussions for regional and global security as well.

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### List of Acronyms

AKA	Afar Koborih Angoyya
ALF	Afar Liberation Front
ANDM	Afar National Democratic Movement
ANDP	Afar National Democratic Party
ANLF	Afar National Liberation Front
ANLM	Afar National Liberation Movement
ANMDG	Afar National Movement for Democracy and Good Governance
ANRDF	Afar National Revolutionary Democratic Front

APDO	Afar People's Democratic Organization
ARDU	Afar Revolutionary Democratic Union
ARDUF	Afar Revolutionary Democratic Union Front
ASA	Afar Students Association
EDA	Eritrean Democratic Alliance
EDM	Eritrean Democratic Movement - DEMHA'E
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ELF-CC	Eritrean Liberation Front - Central Command - SAGEM
ELF-NC	Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front
ELF-RC	Eritrean Liberation Front - Revolutionary Congress
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
NDRP	National Democratic Revolution Programme
OAU	Organization of African Unity
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PLF	People's Liberation Front
RSADO	Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization
TADO	Tigray Afar Democratic Organization
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front

### *Zusammenfassung*

Wie in vielen Teilen Afrikas haben die kolonialen Grenzziehungen auch in den heutigen Staaten am Horn von Afrika das politische Geschehen wesentlich geprägt. Da die Grenzziehungen ausschließlich auf den Interessen der europäischen Expansionsstaaten beruhten, die den ethnischen Aufbau der Gesellschaften vollkommen ignorierten, wurden gleichartige ethnisch-linguistische Gruppen getrennt und fanden sich in zwei oder mehreren aneinandergrenzenden Staaten wieder. Diese Teilungen, die sowohl die traditionellen Verwaltungen als auch die sozioökonomischen Systeme belasteten, schürten die Konflikte in der Region am Horn von Afrika noch zusätzlich.

Das Land des homogenen nomadischen Volkes der Afar wurde zwischen drei Staaten (Äthiopien, Eritrea und Djibouti) aufgeteilt. Im Anschluss an ihren anti-kolonialen Widerstand sahen sich die Afar mit administrativen Gebietsteilungen und einer Marginalisierung durch die zentralen Mächte in diesen drei Staaten konfrontiert. Ihr ein halbes Jahrhundert andauernder Kampf um Selbstbestimmung wurde als Weg hin zu einem unabhängigen Staat begriffen. Doch ist die Bildung eines Staates Afarria oder eines 'Afar-Dreiecks' tatsächlich das endgültige Ziel der politischen Bewegungen der Afar? Was bedeuten Einheit und Selbstbestimmung für sie? Dieser Aufsatz zeichnet den Beginn der modernen politischen Orientierung der Afar und ihren Kampf von der Zeit des europäischen

Kolonialismus bis zur Dominierung durch die nationalen Regierungen am Horn von Afrika nach.

***Schlüsselwörter***

*Äthiopien, Eritrea, Afar, Selbstbestimmung*

***Résumé***

Le tracé des frontières par les pouvoirs coloniaux a profondément marqué le caractère politique des Etats actuels de la corne de l'Afrique, comme celui de beaucoup d'autres régions d'Afrique. Comme le tracé des frontières répondait exclusivement aux intérêts des Etats expansionnistes européens qui ignorèrent totalement la composition ethnique des sociétés, de mêmes groupes ethnico-linguistiques furent séparés et se retrouvèrent présents dans deux ou plusieurs Etats limitrophes. Ces divisions qui constituèrent un lourd défi aussi bien pour les administrations traditionnelles que pour les systèmes socio-économiques, provoquèrent en outre des conflits dans la région de la corne d'Afrique.

Un cas de partition tragique parmi de nombreux autres est celui du peuple nomade homogène des Afar, réparti dans trois Etats de la corne de l'Afrique, à savoir, l'Ethiopie, l'Erythrée et Djibouti. Après avoir mené une résistance anti-coloniale, les Afar se trouvèrent confrontés à des divisions au sein des trois Etats et à une marginalisation par le pouvoir central respectif. Leur combat pour l'autodétermination, qui dure depuis un demi-siècle, a été interprété comme devant aboutir à la mise en place d'un Etat indépendant. Mais la formation d'un Etat appelé Afarria ou Triangle Afar est-elle vraiment l'objectif ultime des mouvements politiques afars ? Que signifient unité et autodétermination pour les Afar ? Cet article retrace et analyse le début de l'orientation politique moderne des Afar et leurs combats depuis l'époque du colonialisme européen jusqu'à leur domination par des gouvernements locaux.

***Mots clés***

*Ethiopie, Erythrée, Afar, autodétermination*

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**Yasin Mohammed Yasin**, MA in development studies at Addis Ababa University, worked with an International Human Rights Organization operating in the Afar region of Ethiopia. Since April 2007, he is doctoral candidate at the University of Hamburg, Department of Political Science.