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Embattled Identity in Northeast Africa: A Comparative Essay

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Abstract

The Northeast African sub-region has been ridden with inter-state and intra-state conflicts since the beginning of the second half of the last century. And most of those conflicts have their roots in the clash of identities. In the pre-colonial period, language and religion constituted the major expressions of identity. While Ethiopia and the Sudan evolved as a mosaic of diverse linguistic and religious groups, Somalia was characterized by relative homogeneity. Colonial rule created sharply defined international boundaries and partitioned some populations among two or more states. This state of affairs gave rise to irredentist movements, the most prominent two manifesting themselves in Eritrea and Somalia. Irredentism was abetted by the British policy of Greater Somalia, which led to a period of armed confrontation between Ethiopia and Somalia. Conversely, in the Sudan, the British followed a deliberate policy of separating the South from the North; this was one of the factors behind the eruption of the civil war in the Sudan. While colonial rule might have sown the seeds for the numerous conflicts that have plagued the sub-region in the post-colonial period, the situation was aggravated by the assimilationist and integrationist ambitions of hegemonic regimes and the inability of liberation movements to aspire beyond the narrow confines of self-determination. The future salvation of the sub-region seems to lie in the fostering of genuinely pluralistic societies that recognize the merits of multiple identities and aspire for a sub-regional confederation rather than the continued veneration of the nation-state.

Résumé

La sous-région du Nord-Est africain est accablée par les conflits inter- et intra-étatiques depuis le début de la seconde moitié du siècle passé. La plupart des conflits trouvent leurs origines dans le clash des cultures. Au cours de la période pré-coloniale, la langue et la religion constituaient les principaux moyens d'expression identitaires. Tandis que l'Éthiopie et le Soudan se présentaient

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comme une mosaïque de groupes linguistiques et religieux, la Somalie, elle, était caractérisée par une relative homogénéité. Le gouvernement colonial a ensuite créé des frontières internationales précises et réparti certaines populations entre deux ou plusieurs états. Cette situation a donné naissance à des mouvements irrédentistes, dont les deux plus visibles se manifestent en Érythrée ainsi qu'en Somalie. L'irrédentisme a été soutenu par la politique britannique autour de la Grande Somalie, qui a conduit à une période de confrontation armée entre l'Érythrée et la Somalie. Au Soudan, les Britanniques ont délibérément mené une politique de séparation du Nord et du Sud, ce qui représente aujourd'hui un des facteurs de déclenchement de la guerre civile au Soudan. Le système colonial a certes semé les graines de la multitude de conflits qui ont accablé cette sous-région durant la période post coloniale, mais cette situation a également été aggravée par les ambitions assimilationnistes et intégrationnistes de régimes hégémoniques, et par les mouvements de libération qui n'aspirent à rien d'autre qu'à l'autodétermination. Le salut de cette sous-région semble se trouver dans le développement de sociétés véritablement pluralistes, reconnaissant les valeurs de la multi-identité et aspirant à une confédération sous-régionale, plutôt qu'à une vénération continuelle de l'État-nation.

Introduction

Africa has more than its fair share of the conflicts that constitute the daily fare of the international media. And when we come to focus on the continent's sub-regions, Northeast Africa seems to stand out conspicuously, providing three of the continent's conflicts—intra-state or inter-state. The Sudan, even as it appears to resolve at long last its long-standing civil war in the south, is standing in the dock on charges of possible genocide in its western region of Darfur. The Somalis' nth attempt to extricate themselves from the tyranny of warlordism appeared finally to have borne fruit with the conclusion of the marathon peace process in Kenya in late 2004, which resulted in the election of a president and the subsequent formation of a government. But, as the Somali capital continues to be rocked by explosions and sniper fire, the future of that government seems highly precarious.

The thorny relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia constitute perhaps the ultimate in intractability. A thirty-year-long war for Eritrean independence from Ethiopia appeared to have come to a merciful end with the victory of the Eritrean People's Liberation Forces in 1991, and the ratification of Eritrean independence in the 1993 referendum. But, before the lapse of a decade, the two states were locked in a war of unprecedented ferocity, characterised by massive deportations and venomous propaganda. Notwithstanding the conclusion of a peace accord in 2000 and arbitration of the boundary issue that ostensibly triggered the conflict, the two states are girding themselves for yet another war.

Only the tiny state of Djibouti appears to live in relative peace and harmony. But the relativity of that peace has been emphasised more than once, as the former French colony had been forced to align itself to one or other of the warring factions in the sub-region. While it has been struggling to maintain a tenuous state of neutrality in the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict, it has tried to broker the Somali peace process in a way that would ensure its own strategic interests while curbing the perceived hegemonic ambitions of Ethiopia, its powerful neighbour to the west.

The question of identity—clan, ethnic, national and regional—lies at the roots of almost all the conflicts delineated above. Ethnic identity and religious affiliation have determined the nature of the Sudanese conflict. In the case of Somalia, we see a dramatic shift from pan-Somali nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s, which brought it into conflict with neighbouring states like Ethiopia and Kenya which had and continue to have a significant Somali population within their bounds, to the more parochial clannish feuds that have been the hallmark of the post-Siyad Barre period (i.e., after 1991). But, nowhere in the sub-region has identity probably been as bitterly contested as in the relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Until 1991, Ethiopians asserted vigorously the Eritreans' Ethiopian-ness while the Eritreans emphasised their uniqueness. Yet, Eritrean independence, sanctioned by the incumbent Ethiopian government with an alacrity that baffled and infuriated many Ethiopians, far from resolving the problem, opened yet another chapter of hostility.

This paper proposes to investigate the genesis and trajectory of what could be characterised as 'embattled identity' in Northeast Africa in a comparative framework. The first part of the paper outlines the pre-colonial mosaic of ethnic and religious affiliation. The second part assesses the impact of the colonial intervention and the legacies it has bequeathed. The third part examines the record of the postcolonial state in resolving or exacerbating (mostly the latter) the problems of identity. The last part concludes by attempting to point out the prospects for the future.

Pre-Colonial Expressions of Identity

Language and religion, characteristically, constituted the two major channels for the expression of identity in pre-colonial Northeast Africa. Almost all the peoples of the sub-region speak languages that fall under either one of two super-families of languages: Afroasiatic, a linguistic designation for a super-family of languages that is spoken on both sides of the Red Sea, and Nilo-Saharan, which covers the geographical area suggested in the term. The Afroasiatic super-family is in turn sub-divided into major families, of

which the most pertinent to the area under investigation are Cushitic and Semitic.

Within the first family (Cushitic) are found the Afar (now split between Djibouti, Eritrea and Ethiopia), the Oromo (predominantly in Ethiopia, with some spill-over into Kenya) and the Somali (the classic case of a 'partitioned' people, scattered as they are in Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia itself). The Semitic family of languages is spoken by the historically dominant groups: Arabic in the Sudan, Amharic in Ethiopia and Tegrēñña in Eritrea; interestingly, Tegrēñña is also the language of the northernmost Ethiopian population enjoying political ascendancy in the post-1991 dispensation. Within the Nilo-Saharan super-family are such predominant groups of the Southern Sudan as the Nuer and Dinka, with some of them (like the Nuer and Anywaa) found on both sides of the Ethio-Sudanese boundary.

Given their extreme sensitivity and the consequent potential for manipulation, statistical breakdowns are hazardous. Nonetheless, a recent study of the Sudan (Lesch 1998:4) gives the following percentages: 34 per cent for the South, 40 per cent for the Arabised North and 26 per cent for the non-Arabised North (such as the Fur). In Ethiopia, the Cushitic-speaking ethnic groups (Afar, Oromo, Somali and a host of groups in south-central Ethiopia) have constituted a majority (Statistical Abstract 1999). But political power has historically been by and large the preserve of the Semitic-speaking groups, particularly the Amharic- and Tegrēñña-speaking ones, even if their relationship has been marked by alternations of partnership and rivalry. Within the Semitic group are also the economically powerful Gurage and Harari. Eritrea is a predominantly Semitic-speaking country, Tegrēñña and Tegrā between them accounting for a large percentage, perhaps the majority, of the population.

In contrast to the above scenario, Somalia presents a relatively homogeneous picture. Somalis speak the same Cushitic language and adhere to the same religion, Islam. But this apparent homogeneity has concealed clashes of identity at subsidiary levels: between the nomad (Samale) and the settler (Sab), between different clans and between different religious orders (tariqqa). The supremacy of the nomad has been enshrined both in the camel, his proverbial beast of burden, and the name 'Samale' that—modified into Somali—has come to have generic application (Brons 2001:89-95). It is these subsidiary fissions that explain, perhaps more than anything else, the apparent anomaly of such a homogeneous people having been rent into irreconcilable factions for nearly a decade and a half.

The anomaly is all the more striking in that Somalia, compared to the other countries of the sub-region, apparently enjoys not only linguistic but also religious homogeneity. Elsewhere in the sub-region, there is a more

variegated picture. The religious profile of the Sudan is reportedly 70 per cent Muslim, 25 per cent followers of what are described as 'indigenous beliefs' and 5 per cent Christian (Lesch 1998:20). Such statistical information is hard to come by in the case of Ethiopia, but Christians and Muslims are generally believed to be in equal proportion. More or less the same situation seems to prevail in the case of Eritrea.

In the pre-colonial period, advanced levels of state formation took place primarily in the Sudan and in Ethiopia. Beginning with the Christian kingdoms of ancient times, the Sudan saw the rise of the Funj kingdom (1504–1821) in the east and the Sultanate of Dar Fur (sixteenth century to 1916) in the west. The Funj kingdom, which had dominated the historically central riverine area of the Sudan, fell prey to the more mighty forces of Muhammad Ali's Egypt, thereby ushering in the period known as the Turkiyya (1821–1881)—so-called because of the dominant role that officials of Turco-Circassian origin played in the dynasty inaugurated by Muhammad Ali in 1805 (Holt & Daly 1988:Part II).

The Turkiyya was characterised above all by vigorous expansion in the south (following the course of the Nile) combined with mass conscription and mass enslavement of southerners. Egyptian misrule and what was perceived as their moral laxity triggered a fundamentalist movement that combined Sudanese nationalism and religious puritanism. The Mahdiyya (1881–1898), even if it had scarcely any liberating effects in the South, formed the backdrop to the rise of modern Sudanese nationalism. It fell under the barrage of British cannon in 1898, when the so-called Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (in actual fact British colonial rule) was inaugurated. Dar Fur meanwhile continued to exist in splendid isolation until it succumbed to the might of British arms in 1916 (Holt and Daly 1988: Part III).

The Ethiopian region witnessed an even more continuous history of state formation. The Aksumite kingdom (first to seventh centuries AD) constituted the ancestor and the inspiration for a succession of regimes that came to be formed in the Ethiopian highlands. Its conversion to Christianity in the fourth century AD gave those regimes their main ethos and ideology. The Christian kingdom attained the apogee of its power in what historians of Ethiopia have come to characterise as the medieval period, 1270–1527 (Taddesse 1972), presaging the even more spectacular expansion of the empire in modern times under Menilek II. These successive regimes incorporated the neighbouring peoples through a combination of force and diplomacy, mostly the former. The Eritrean highlands were essentially part of this Christian polity while the lowlands formed a buffer zone or a bone of con-

tention between the dominant powers in the Sudan and the Ethiopian highlands.

In Somalia, notwithstanding the linguistic and religious homogeneity described above, no major pan-Somali political entity emerged. Instead, Somali came to be affiliated to one or other of the religious orders (Qaadriya, Ahmadiya, Salihiya, etc.) or the various clans. The only significant attempt to forge a pan-Somali polity came about in the first two decades of the twentieth century in reaction to colonial domination. As in the Sudanese case, it combined religious fundamentalism with Somali nationalism. Colonial intervention initiated a fatal divergence between clan territories and state borders. The efforts to rectify that divergence were to be the hallmark of Somali nationalism in the postcolonial era.

Colonial Legacies

As elsewhere in the continent, the last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed a feverish race among European colonial powers to carve out first their respective spheres of influence and subsequently their colonial possessions. Britain, driven above all by the quest to dominate the waters of the Nile, vanquished the Mahdist state and established its hegemony in the Sudan. The Italians, taking advantage of the political disarray in northern Ethiopia subsequent to the death of Emperor Yohannes IV in 1889, proclaimed their colony of Eritrea. The French ensconced themselves in the tiny but strategically important colony that they baptised French Somaliland, known after independence by the most significant port town of Djibouti. The other Somalis were carved up among the British (British Somaliland and the North Frontier District in Kenya), the Italians (Italian Somaliland) and the Ethiopians (the Ogaden). Only Ethiopia, thanks to its decisive victory in 1896 over Italian colonial ambitions, managed to remain not only independent but also a beneficiary of the partition process.

The colonial partition was sanctioned through a series of bilateral boundary delimitation agreements. Ethiopia, surrounded as it was by the tripartite European colonial powers, was the sole African signatory. These agreements, concluded in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, gave the Northeast African entities by and large the political boundaries that they have maintained to this day. As elsewhere in Africa, the boundaries reflected colonial ambitions and capabilities rather than the wishes and affiliations of the indigenous peoples (Asiwaju 1984). While all trans-frontier peoples lost in this cartographic exercise, undoubtedly the great losers were the Somali, who found themselves partitioned into five territories (British Somaliland, French Somaliland, Italian Somaliland, the North Frontier District in Kenya and the Ogaden in Ethiopia).

The only anomaly in this otherwise standard colonial arrangement was the participation of an indigenous African polity in the partition process. Ethiopia incorporated part of the Somali territory (known as the Ogaden in the past, currently forming the Ethiopian Somali regional state). Conversely and equally significantly, it lost to the Italians its historic maritime province of the Marab Mellash, which the new colonial master, drawing a leaf from ancient Hellenic geography, re-christened Eritrea. This gain and loss had a decisive impact on the course of the sub-region's postcolonial history. Both inspired irredentist movements.

Somali irredentism got its first expression through the politico-religious movement led by Mohamed Abdule Hasan, now venerated as the father of Somali nationalism. His two-decade long struggle against colonial occupation, so fervently and ardently expressed through his extraordinary poetic outpourings, forms an epic in modern Somali history. He was able to unite divergent clans, classes and occupational categories in quest of a common destiny. As a prominent historian of the Somali has concluded: 'The tangible benefits they [i.e. the leaders of the movement] achieved were few. Yet the values they expressed and the memories they left became part of the consciousness that would later sustain the growth of modern Somali nationalism' (Cassanelli 1982:253).

Ironically, it was the colonial powers themselves (notably Italy and Britain) who gave Somali irredentism a boost after the collapse of the dervish movement. In 1936, Italy finally achieved its dream of a Northeast African colonial empire when it crushed Ethiopian resistance through a ruthless application of brute force, including the internationally banned mustard gas. The first act of the Fascist dictator, Mussolini, was the proclamation of 'Italian East Africa' (*Africa orientale italiana*), which merged and reconfigured the three possessions (Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia) along ethno-linguistic lines. Thus Eritrea was expanded to include the Tegrēña-speaking northern Ethiopian province of Tegray while the Ogaden was merged with Italian Somaliland to form a fairly expanded entity. The entity became even bigger, albeit briefly, when the Italians managed to annex British Somaliland in 1940 (Laitin and Samatar 1987:62).

After the collapse of the Italian colonial empire in 1941, the British, who had assumed custodianship of both Eritrea and Somaliland, took it upon themselves to formulate schemes for future administration. For Eritrea, they developed a scheme of detaching the lowlands and attaching it to the Sudan while uniting the Tegrēña-speaking populations of the Eritrean highlands and the northern Ethiopian province of Tegray, in effect creating Greater

Tegray. This scheme became history when the UN resolution not only kept Eritrea intact but also federated it with Ethiopia.

For Somalia, the British adumbrated the idea of 'Greater Somalia', aiming at the unification of all the Somali-inhabited areas of the Horn of Africa. A brainchild of the British foreign minister Ernest Bevin, the idea, so pregnant with pan-Somali nationalism, formed the springboard of Somali irredentism both in the course of the struggle for independence and post-independent Somalia.

In Eritrea, irredentism had two sources and protagonists—Eritrean and Ethiopian. It found its first and most passionate expression in the writings of the Eritrean intellectual, Blatta Gabra-Egziabher Gila-Maryam, who castigated Emperor Menilek in the most vitriolic fashion for his abandonment of Eritrea to the Italians (Bahru 2002:156-57). His pleas appeared to have struck a sympathetic chord with Menilek's grandson and successor, Iyyasu, who is reported to have vowed not to wear the imperial crown until he had reunited Eritrea with its motherland. Italian alarm at what was perceived as his mobilisation to this end was one of the factors that contributed to the premature demise of the young prince in 1916, when the threatened colonial powers (British, French and Italian) joined forces with his domestic opponents to dethrone him on charges of apostasy.

The end of Italian rule in Eritrea in 1941 gave rise to an even more strident irredentist movement spearheaded by Eritrean Unionists and vigorously supported by the Ethiopian government. Conversely, particularly among the Muslim section of the population, there developed an equally strong movement for independence. The UN resolution of 1950 to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia was in essence a compromise formula to accommodate these antithetical positions.

The British, who were at such pains to forge the unity of the Somalis, followed a diametrically opposite policy in the Sudan. Through what came to be known as the Southern Policy, they effectively sealed off the South from the North. The ostensible rationale was to protect the Southerners from the habitual raids and exactions of the Northerners. Pursuant to the policy, Northern traders and officials were barred from the South. Arabic was excluded in favour of the Southern languages and mother-tongues. Islamic schools were closed and Muslim preachers banned while Christian missionaries were given all possible encouragement (Lesch 1998:31-32). The ultimate effect of the policy was to sow the seeds of Southern separatism, abetted by the short-sighted policies of the postcolonial Northern regimes.

The Postcolonial Record

Independence from colonial rule did not usher in an era of peace and stability. On the contrary, all countries of the sub-region, with the exception of Djibouti, came to be locked in internecine or inter-state conflicts that have not yet been completely resolved. The Sudan went through two editions of a bloody civil war (1955-1972, 1983-2004) that seems to be coming to an end only now. Somalia went through a process of consolidation (through the merger of the two Somalilands, British and Italian), confrontation with its neighbour Ethiopia, and disintegration. The case of Eritrea and Ethiopia was rather unique. Ethiopia was never colonised and the short-lived Fascist Italian occupation came to an end in 1941. When Italian colonial rule came to an end in Eritrea in the same year, it was first federated with and then absorbed by Ethiopia, fought a thirty-year-long war for independence, and is now locked in seemingly interminable warfare with its southern neighbour.

As stated above, the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia, adopted above all as the golden mean between absorption and separation, was perhaps the best possible arrangement under the circumstances. Although it was structurally flawed (Ethiopia for instance being the sovereign entity rather than one of the federated parties), it could have accommodated the divergent interests and aspirations triggered by the decolonisation process. But it was not allowed to continue. Eritrea's autonomous status, albeit under the Ethiopian crown, was systematically corroded until, in 1962, the Eritrean parliament decided to dissolve itself and Eritrea became Ethiopia's fourteenth province. Prominent in achieving that fateful decision were the Eritrean Unionists, who controlled both the executive and the legislative arms of the Eritrean government. But they were abetted and buttressed by the Ethiopian imperial government, which had found an autonomous Eritrea an irksome anomaly in its autocratic and highly centralised political order.

The dissolution of the federation signalled the launching of the armed struggle in Eritrea, which lasted from 1961 to 1991. Those eventful thirty years were marked not only by tens of thousands of corpses but also by ferocious contestations of identity. History in particular became a battleground. While Ethiopians considered Eritrea to have been historically an integral part of Ethiopia, Eritreans were at pains to portray the two countries as sharply distinct entities. As Eritreans pushed the stakes higher—shifting from the restoration of the federation to the unequivocal recognition of Eritrea's independence—successive Ethiopian regimes resorted to force as the ultimate solution. The few initiatives that were taken for the peaceful resolution of the armed conflict were aborted by the half-heartedness of both parties. Particularly after the 1974 revolution, the military option increasingly became

the choice of both the Ethiopian military regime that had taken the helm and the Eritrean guerrilla movement, which had come to view itself as invincible. Towards the end of the 1980s, the military seesaw tilted decisively in favour of the Eritreans. In May 1991, the Eritrean Popular Liberation Forces (EPLF) triumphantly entered the Eritrean capital, Asmara, heralding the birth of an independent Eritrean state.

Given the alliance that the EPLF had forged with the force that simultaneously seized power in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and the unstinting support that the latter gave to Eritrean independence, the two countries appeared set for an era of peace and cooperation. On the surface, everything appeared to promise just that. But the outward camaraderie concealed an ambiguous relationship loaded with explosive potentialities—particularly on the issues of the boundary, currency and the hundreds of thousands of Eritreans who continued to reside in Ethiopia in relative comfort. Those issues were at the root of the new round of conflict that flared up in 1998 and that still remains unresolved to date.

In the Sudan, the first shots of the civil war that has just come to an end were fired on the eve of independence. A mutiny in 1955 by Southern units of the Sudanese army stationed in Equatoria province snowballed into the first Anya-Nya movement, as the Southerners' armed struggle spearheaded by the Sudan Africa National Union (SANU) came to be known. The Southerners' quest for autonomous status stood in fundamental collision with the integrationist and assimilationist policies pursued by successive regimes (military as well as civilian) in Khartoum (Lesch 1998:36-43). As the intransigence of the North escalated, the Southerners' also raised the stake higher, from autonomy to independence—in somewhat the same manner as the Eritreans shifted their goal from the restoration of the violated federation to unequivocal independence.

The Addis Ababa Agreement of February 1972 ended the first phase of the civil war by recognising the ethnic plurality of the Sudan. The agreement granted regional autonomy to the South, provided it proportional representation in the national assembly in Khartoum, and recognised English as the official language of the region. Unfortunately, the agreement was abrogated in 1983 by General Numairy, the same Northern ruler who had signed it in the first place, with the imposition of the Islamic sharia law throughout the country and the breaking up of the South into three regions. Exacerbating the situation was the conflict over two vital resources: oil and water (the latter triggered by the Jonglei Canal project, which aimed to drain the southern swamps known as the sudd).

Thus was initiated the second chapter of the civil war known as Anya-Nya II led by the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and the Sudan

People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), as the military and political wings were respectively known (Lesch 1998:43-48). That second edition of the Sudanese Civil War has lasted two decades. And by some kind of perverse logic, when that civil war seems to be coming to an end, another one with genocidal dimensions is rearing its head in the western part of the country.

While integrationist and assimilationist policies in the Sudan and Ethiopia gave rise to separatist movements, the situation in Somalia was characterised by a state vigorously pursuing a policy of uniting all Somalis under one flag. This quest came to be enshrined in the five-pointed star that the Somalis adopted as their national emblem on independence. Two points of those stars were realised when British and Italian Somaliland united to form Somalia on the morrow of independence. But that still left the Somalis who found themselves scattered among the neighbouring countries—Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya. Of all the three regions that were regarded as terra irredenta, it was the Ethiopian region of the Ogaden that became the major target of Somali irredentist aspirations. This led to a minor clash between the two neighbouring countries in 1963 and a major war in 1977–78. The latter, resulting in the defeat and disintegration of the Somali army, augured the end of the regime of dictatorial Siyad Barre regime.

Unable to check the growth of the opposition liberation movements that had sprouted subsequent to the military debacle, Barre fled for his life in 1991. But his demise also marked the collapse of the Somali state, as warlords battled for control of the capital and the northern and northeastern parts of the country broke away to form the more or less independent states of Somaliland and Puntland. In effect, Somalia drifted back to its proverbial statelessness. Redeeming the dismal picture somewhat have been a resilient civil society and the ingenuity of the Somali people that had kept such basic services as banking and telecommunications running. This state of affairs has even given rise to a celebration of what to ordinary eyes has been a state of anarchy as a 'showcase for alternative, consensus-driven state formation', or the 'liberation of Africa from the tyranny of the state' (Brons: 285, 287; cf. 283).

Future Prospects

Clearly, therefore, the postcolonial record has not been much of an improvement on the colonial one. As in so many other parts of Africa, what seems to be unfolding in its northeastern sector—distinguished as it is by endemic conflict and abject poverty—has been what Afro-pessimists would consider a posthumous vindication of colonialism. But neither condemnation nor passive resignation can help the region extricate itself from the current impasse. One has to address the central issue that has made the region a hotbed of

ethnic and inter-state conflict. At the heart of the problem is the issue of identity, more specifically the challenge of reconciling divergent and often contradictory forms of identity—ethnic versus territorial nationalism, irredentism versus territorial sovereignty, self-determination versus interdependence.

Probably the most important lesson that decades of conflict have left behind is the elusive nature of the concept of self-determination. Perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on the right to self-determination than on the imperatives of political pluralism. If the latter is guaranteed, the need to exercise the former becomes less urgent. Self-determination, sweet as its sounds, has been perilous in its exercise, as there is no guarantee that it would not merely help to replace one oppressive elite with another. The nation-state, the ultimate expression of self-determination, seems to have become not only obsolete globally but also a fertile ground for even more deadly conflicts. Difficult as it may appear, the countries of the region have to think beyond and above their national bounds.

The idea of a sub-regional confederation has been mooted more than once in the past. Indeed, in the case of Eritrea and Ethiopia, the short-lived federation, fraught as it was with structural and circumstantial problems, is vindicated in retrospect as the only viable option at the time it was introduced. Although it eventually opted for a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ vote on the issue of independence during the 1993 referendum, even the EPLF had held out federation as one of the options during the period of armed struggle.

It is also interesting that one of the first things that was sponsored by the EPLF government was a conference on the theme of bilateral cooperation. As the convenor of that conference argued in the introduction to the book that ensued from the meeting: ‘nations may determine themselves into bigger polities as surely as they may into smaller entities’ (Tekle 1994:5). One of the Ethiopian participants in the conference, in a plea for future political affiliation, also proposed a ‘confederation or commonwealth’ (Andreas 1994: 28ff). Alas, those positive expressions became pious wishes as the two countries came to be locked in even more deadly conflict some four years later.

A similar fate befell the idea of a confederation of Ethiopia and Somalia in the 1970s. A brainchild of the Cuban leader Fidel Castro, who had befriended the two professedly Marxist regimes in the Horn, it was rendered rather impracticable from the outset by the inclusion of South Yemen, apparently for no other cogent reason than the fact that it was also considered a progressive and allied state by the Soviet bloc. At any rate the idea was buried under the deafening roar of artillery fire as Ethiopia and Somalia entered their bloodiest clash since Somalia emerged as an independent state in 1960.

But the fact that federations or confederations have failed in the past—either in practice or conceptually—does not invalidate the argument that, ultimately, those options, particularly the con-federal one, remain the only ones if the chronic violence that has bedevilled the sub-region is to be removed. It is interesting that, as recently as November 2002, a conference of specialists on the sub-region held in Florida came to a similar conclusion. Its resolution, known as the Tampa Declaration, envisaged a confederation of the countries of the Horn of Africa (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia). The idea was subsequently broadened into a northeast African confederation to include also Kenya, the Sudan and Uganda.

Those seven countries also happen to be member states of the sub-regional organisation IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority for Development). That organisation was first established in 1986 as the IGADD (Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development) with the objective mainly of combating the recurrent droughts that had afflicted the sub-region from 1974 to 1984. It was reconstituted in 1996 with a broader mission and programmes that included economic cooperation (and eventual integration) and political and humanitarian affairs as well as the initial objective of agricultural development and environmental protection. The formation of ‘a regional identity’ has also been among the declared objectives of the IGAD.

As in the case of kindred regional and sub-regional organisations, the overall record of the IGAD has not been that impressive. Indeed, compared to other similar organisations like ECOWAS (for West Africa) and SADC (for Southern Africa) it has made little visible impact. But in recent years, the picture seems to have changed. The negotiations that culminated in the apparent termination in 2004 of the two major conflicts in the sub-region—that is, the Somali peace process and the Sudan peace agreement, both of which took place in Kenya—were sponsored by the IGAD. But, it was leaders of the member states rather than the organisation or its secretariat as such who played the critical role. Nonetheless, these initiatives hopefully mark a new era of positive engagement by the organisation with the critical political issues of the sub-region.

But a northeast African confederation cannot be willed into existence. There are a host of practical and political problems that need to be overcome before the idea could become a reality. The first practical problem is the scope. The IGAD structure, which includes the two East African states of Kenya and Uganda, probably over-stretches the territorial framework. For these two states, a resuscitation of the old East African Community (including Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) would make much more economic and ethnic sense. That indeed is what is taking place at the moment. A purely Horn of Africa confederation—consisting of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia and

Somalia—while making a lot of sense from the point of view of the ethnic inter-dependence of the area, would probably be objectionable to the lesser states, who might be apprehensive of Ethiopian hegemonic aspirations. The expansion of the confederation arrangement to include the Sudan would thus have, at the very least, the salutary effect of allaying such apprehensions, as the Sudan would constitute an effective counter-weight to Ethiopia.

But, whatever the practical problems, the peoples of the sub-region have no other option but to think and act high if they are to break out of the cul de sac into which their political elites have driven them as they sought to give expression to their divergent and sometimes conflicting identities (Samatar 1986: 20). If only to atone for their past misdeeds, the onus for executing this vital task of self-preservation lies above all on those elites, checked and monitored by genuinely pluralist and democratic systems. The forging of such systems remains the supreme challenge of the century.

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