

Book review

Tekeste Negash. *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The federal experience*. Nordiska Afrika Institutet, Uppsala, 1997, pp. 234

Shimeles Lewoye, Email: lewoyeshime@gmail.com

Department of History and Heritage Management, Faculty of Social Sciences, Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia

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This book focused on the history of the Eritrean federation with Ethiopia, 1952-1962 stating that, the Eritrean Tigreans were the determinants of the Eritrean federation with Ethiopia and her secession in 1961. The author states that they were the Eritrean Tigreans who worked to abolish the federation than the Ethiopians. The rise of the nationalist movement in Ethiopia in the second half of the 20th century challenged both the political development and historiography of the country. Deconstructing the history of Ethiopia to legitimize their armed struggle as well as targeting their goals was one of their strategies in their struggle. They deconstructed the history of Ethiopia from “a museum of nations and nationalities” to “a prison of nations and nationalities. According to Bahru Zewude, the pro-Eritrean People Liberation Front (EPLF) Eritrean nationalists and Oromo nationalists abused Ethiopian history for their political purposes.¹

Tekeste Negash, an Eritrean by birth and a historian by profession, tries to re-deconstruct the Eritrean nationalists’ narration regarding Eritrea in the period of the Eritrean federation with Ethiopia from 1952 to 1962. The book organized in six chapters argues that it is Eritreans themselves particularly the temptation of the Unionist Party (UP) for the absolute Eritrean union with Ethiopia and the weaknesses of other political parties like the Muslim League to protect the federation hastened the dissolution of the Eritrean federation. Here the author argues that the Ethiopian government's influence on the dissolution of the federation was very little (pp. 90-91). Tekeste criticizes the literature of Bereket Habte Sellassie, Ogbazghi Yohannes, Ruth Iyob,

¹BahruZewde, “A Century of Ethiopian Historiography,” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2, Special Issue Dedicated to the XIVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies (November 2000), Pp. 16-17.

Araya Tseggai, John Markakis, David Pool, Richard Sherman, Haggai Erlich, and Edmund Keller for distorting the history of the Federation. Particularly he criticizes the work of G. Kennedy Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition* which talks about an irredentist movement in Eritrea that was financed and organized by Ethiopians.

He mostly depended on the archival materials of the British Foreign Office, accounts of the British officers in different positions of the Eritrean federation, documents of the Eritrean assembly, and some newspapers published weekly in Eritrea and Ethiopia. But he failed to consult other sources from the Ethiopian foreign minister. This misleads his argument regarding the Ethiopian effort in the struggle for the Eritrean union with Ethiopia from 1941 to 1950. He argues that the Eritrean federation with Ethiopia was fundamentally the role of the UP rather than the Ethiopian diplomatic effort. He states: "It was indeed greatly due to the effective presence of the UP that the Four Powers began to seriously entertain Ethiopian claims. The UP produced evidence that the Ethiopian government needed to convince the world of the rightness of its claims. Ethiopian diplomacy, however, was no match for that of Italy. (p. 67)"

In the first chapter he outlines the genesis of Eritrean identity in the colonial period from 1890 to 1950 both in the period of Italian colonial rule and the British Military Administration (BMA). Accordingly, he argues that racist ideology between Eritreans and Ethiopians, the economic boom, and the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1935-1936 were the three factors for the emergence of Eritrean identity since the mid of the 1930s (pp. 16-17).

In the second chapter dealing with the struggle for the future of Eritrea, Tekeste strongly defends the idea that UP was Ethiopian irredentism in Eritrea. He argues that the Ethiopian influence on UP came late because of the reconstruction process of Ethiopia after five years of Italian occupation and other troubles like the rebellion in Eastern Tigray (p. 38). He adds that the BMA in Eritrea was against the UP, and beyond supporting the separatist party they challenged the movement of the UP (pp. 39-40). As stated above, the author tries to undermine the Ethiopian government's interest and commitment to unite Eritrea with her motherland Ethiopia. He fails to give detailed information on other parties in Eritrea. The narration regarding these parties was regarding their relation with the UP.

Dealing with the history of the federation from 1952 to 1962 in chapter three, he tries to challenge the perceptions that made the dissolution of the federation by the Ethiopian government rather than argue that the Eritreans were the main actors behind the dissolution of the federation. He devalued the later Eritrean insurgents' criticism of the Ethiopian government. His dependence on the British foreign office documents on the development and decline of the Eritrean federation made his argument neutral, sound, and reliable. According to Tekeste, the weakness of Tedla Bairu, the chief executive of the federation, and his continuous conflict with the assembly in the first two years of the federation deteriorated the trust of the people of Eritrea as a whole and the assembly of the federation particularly. This increased the opposition and mistrust both from the federalists and separatists. The temptation of Tedla Bairu to hasten Eritrean absolute union with Ethiopia was one of the challenges behind the opposition against his administration. However, the author didn't clearly state the role of foreigners, particularly British employees in the police, court, and advisory posts in strengthening the opposition against the federation.

In chapter four the author elaborated on the struggle between the unionists and the federalists. Here besides the problem of the friction between the Unionist Party and the Muslim League on the preservation of the federation and the 1956 election in Eritrea, the movement of banditries in Eritrea was the challenge of the Eritrean election. Tekeste confirmed that both the federalists and nationalists intentionally or unwittingly distorted the event regarding the abrogation of the federation. The complainants made the Ethiopian government responsible for the abrogation of the federation. But Tekeste soundly debated that it was the Eritrean government rather than the Ethiopian government that hastened the abrogation of the federation. He said that the weak propaganda as well as disunity among the complainants, particularly among the Muslim League strengthened the unionists. The author decided that the main actors behind the dissolution of the federation were Eritreans themselves particularly the Unionist Party rather than the Ethiopian government.

Chapter Five focuses on the development of the armed struggle for the independence of Eritrea. It focused on the birth of the three organizations, i.e. Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM), Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), and Eritrean People Liberation Front (EPLF). Though the author tries to construct the Pan-Islam and Pan-Arab tendency of ELF and the ideological and

cultural, particularly, religious differences of ELF and EPLF, he ignored the role of the Muslim Arabs including Egypt in the establishment of these insurgent groups. On the other hand, he didn't trace the origin of ELF to the Muslim League of the 1940s and the 1960s.

The role of the Arabs particularly Egyptian interest in Eritrea and their role in aggravating the opposition in Eritrea starting from the 1940s were not addressed in this book. As it was known Egypt claimed a part of Eritrea using her footprint on the Red Sea coast following the withdrawal of Ottoman Turks. On the other hand, the opposition movements in Eritrea since the end of the 1950s were supported by Egypt to destabilize Ethiopia which stood against the 1959 water agreement. Tekeste ignored these issues which played a vital role in the opposition in Eritrea.

To conclude, the thesis of the book is that the Eritrean federation and union with Ethiopia and the secession of Eritrea were the diplomatic and military efforts of Eritreans, respectively. The strength of the book is it is the first comprehensive historical writing on the history of Eritrean federation with Ethiopia. On the other hand, an intensive use of archival materials made the work more reliable and some of the arguments sound. However, the book didn't elaborate on why the Eritrean Tigreans were radically shifted from uniting Eritrea to Ethiopia to separating her. On the other hand, the foreign influence in the secessionist movement of Eritreans wasn't given due attention. The other limitation is that the author didn't consult sources from the Ethiopian side. As a result, he failed to show the Ethiopian government's diplomatic effort in the struggle for uniting Eritrea. This led him to undermine the Ethiopian effort on the future of Eritrea since 1941. However, this book gave clues about the Eritrean federation with Ethiopia and its aftermath. Those interested in knowing about the Eritrean problem can use this book as an additional source.