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Writing Eritrea: History and Representation in a Bad Neighborhood

Richard Reid

Abstract: This paper reflects on the ways in which Eritrea has been written about since circa 2001, the point at which the country entered a new phase of heightened authoritarianism and increased international isolation. It considers the ways in which Eritrea has been seen largely in “presentist” terms, due in no small way to the Eritrean government’s own intrinsic hostility to independent historical research, with an overwhelming fixation on its dire human rights and governance record, and on the nature of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), which governs in all but name. The paper urges a more historical approach, beginning with the critical three decades that preceded the emergence of the EPLF in the early 1970s.

Résumé: Cet article porte sur les manières par lesquelles l’on a écrit sur l’Érythrée depuis 2001, au moment où le pays est entré dans une nouvelle phase d’autoritarisme et d’isolement international accrus. Il prend en considération les modalités par lesquelles l’Érythrée a été largement vue dans des termes “présentistes,” en raison de l’hostilité intrinsèque non négligeable du gouvernement vers la recherche historique indépendante, avec une propagande débordante sur les points marqués sur les droits de l’homme et la gouvernance ainsi que la nature du Front de Libération du Peuple Érythréen (EPLF), qui gouverne dans tout sauf que dans le nom qu’il porte. L’article prône pour une approche historique plus poussée, en ouvrant avec les trois décennies critiques qui ont précédé l’émergence de l’EPLF au début des années 70.

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Introduction: Whatever Happened to Eritrea?¹

In 2001, I published a paper in this journal lamenting at length the fact that Eritrea – which had won its independence from Ethiopia less than a decade earlier – had yet to emerge from the shadow of Ethiopia in terms of historical scholarship, and break into the historical mainstream in its own right.² This reflected, I believed, a relative ignorance about the country, a lack of knowledge which was in some ways understandable, given the relative seclusion of Eritrea’s liberation war over thirty years, and the absolutely dominant position of Ethiopia in both scholarly and geopolitical consciousness; but it was an ignorance which seemed, too, to be almost wilful, as Eritrean independence appeared to be a fact with which many analysts and scholars of the region were profoundly uncomfortable. The legendary prickliness of the Eritrean leadership, its reluctance to allow outsiders a glimpse of its inner world, and of course the putative righteousness of its cause won it the admiration of a small group of dedicated followers, to be sure;³ I was myself a relative latecomer to that eclectic crew, and my 2001 essay was in some respects a reflection of my own Eri-phililia. More generally, however, Eritrea’s defensive and suspicious stance was regarded as obstructive and unwarrantedly arrogant. This upstart little nation, born of Italian tactical blunders more than a century earlier and carved out of the northern rocks using the crudest of tools, with its unapologetically if teeth-clenchingly upbeat patriotism underpinned by a deeply-rooted militaristic political culture; this stubborn little *parvenu* territory, which had so profoundly disrupted the balance of the Horn of Africa, was greeted with barely-disguised scepticism and even hostility from various quarters. For the leadership, it had quickly become an exercise in prophecy self-fulfilment: the world is against us because of what, and where, we are; therefore we must be on guard against the world, which doesn’t understand us. To an extent, this attitude was the product of a decidedly “bad neighborhood,” characterized as it was by a history of markedly well-defined political and cultural identities which underpinned expansionist states, notably those based in central and northern Ethiopia; it had long been a violent region, as a result, and much of the violence was concentrated in and around the area of present-day Eritrea.

¹ Thanks go to the reviewers of an earlier draft, and to numerous Eritrean friends and colleagues who must remain anonymous.

² Richard Reid, “The Challenge of the Past: The Struggle for Historical Legitimacy in Independent Eritrea,” *History in Africa* 28 (2001), 239–272.

³ A sample of their work would include Basil Davidson, Lionel Cliffe and Bereket Habte Selassie (eds.), *Behind the War in Eritrea* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1980); Lionel Cliffe and Basil Davidson (eds.), *The Long Struggle of Eritrea for Independence and Constructive Peace* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 1988); Roy Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning* (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 1998 [revised second edition]); Dan Connell, *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 1997).

Moreover, independent Eritrea was itself born at a particularly turbulent moment for the region, wedged in between much larger and stronger neighbors, Sudan and Ethiopia, which themselves were experiencing dramatic change – and all this against a backdrop of Somalia’s disintegration.

Some years have passed. The little group of devotees has dwindled somewhat. Much has happened to Eritrea in the interim, and yet, in other ways, nothing much has changed. In 2001, the Eritrean government, by most accounts, turned decidedly nasty, as security forces arrested in virtually a single swoop most of President Isaias Afewerki’s own political cohort – the senior leadership of the EPLF (Eritrean People’s Liberation Front), the movement formed in the early 1970s which took Eritrea to independence, after one of the longest wars in Africa’s history, in 1991 – and closed down an embryonic but increasingly energetic free press. Political prisoners and prisoners of conscience proliferated in the years that followed: journalists, Christians, Muslims, army deserters, the putatively corrupt, the wilfully critical. No-one was exempt, it seemed, as the regime returned decisively to its intolerant roots, roots embedded in the bitter conflicts of the early 1970s. Meanwhile national service – originally projected as both the cause and the effect of a willing, eager patriotism – became a matter of mass indefinite detention, and tens of thousands of young Eritreans have since opted for hazardous flight from their homeland. In external affairs, the government could not get past the blocking issue of the continued Ethiopian occupation of Badme, and railed with increasing impotence against the injustice of an international community which seemed tacitly to support Meles Zenawi in just about (if not quite) everything he did. Consequently, Eritrea fell out with the European Union and the US, walked out of the regional organisation, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, refused for several years to take up its seat at the African Union, fired regular broadsides at the United Nations, and, closer to home, clashed with Djibouti and eschewed the international consensus on Somalia, leading to the imposition of sanctions under which the regime continues to labor. And so, a large part of this essay is concerned with the period since c. 2001, for one question is usually asked of those who work on Eritrea: “whatever happened to it?”

This question is interesting, but not because I want to explain it; rather, I am interested in what we might describe as Eritrea’s *literary life*, and in exploring the ways in which in recent times this pivotal but seriously neglected country is given substance, shape and representation. At the heart of it is a concern with the remarkably presentist approach which defines the scrutiny of Eritrea, with an overwhelming if wholly understandable concentration on the incumbent regime, and on the blocking issue of human rights. This is an approach which preserves the putatively “sinister” in aspic and denies the territory its historical trajectory, and thus its temporal character. At the same time, however, this is not simply a matter of foreigners’ myopia – a concept which holds powerful sway within Isaias Afewerki’s circle, of course. This is also the story of the Eritrean regime’s own suppression of

the past (except very select aspects of it, notably related to the EPLF's own mission and essential rectitude), its own brutal and militaristic presentism, and its destruction, over the past decade or so, of any kind of meaningful research culture within Eritrea itself. Alongside the innate presentism of a broadly-defined "international community," the Eritrean government has long blocked anything resembling free and independent historical research or public debate, in the pursuit of internal political control through the reification of selected aspects of the recent past: i.e., the putative salvation of Eritrea by the EPLF from the twin evils of sectarian tribalism and foreign machinations. Such presentism prevents policy analysis and the increasingly powerful humanitarian lobby – both mostly well-meaning – from achieving a rounded, historical understanding of Eritrea.

In sum, then, we are concerned with the ways in which troubled and troubling places, in the global scale of things, get studied and indeed allow themselves to be studied. As I argued in 2001, Eritrea was not well endowed in that department to begin with; since then, if anything, the situation has worsened. This paper examines a sample of material produced on Eritrea since around 2001, "year zero" for most analysts. The material itself is mostly in English and available to a global public, because my core concerns are the *accessibility to* and *representation of* Eritrea. It is by no means intended to be exhaustive, but rather illustrative.

Moreover, in making the case for a more historical approach to the country, I have in mind not the "nationalist history" of which the incumbent regime might approve, but rather the kind of historical work which does not merely see Eritrea as an appendage of Ethiopia. Above all, my contention is that the reopening of the intellectual space in and around Eritrea – and explicitly the democratic nature of unconstrained historical research and the public debate which emanates from it – will be vital to the future reconstruction of the country. Specifically, I make the case that a deeper (and more public) appreciation of Eritrean history in the decades before the emergence of the EPLF is critical to an understanding of contemporary Eritrea, and that it will help elucidate many of the issues which are of current concern to policy-makers and humanitarians.

For the moment, however, Eritrea has become historical *terra incognita* to an even greater degree, in ways I would not have thought possible some years ago. In large part, this is connected to the ongoing scholarly and political (and of course economic) fixation with Ethiopia, of which Eritrea is routinely seen as a toxic accessory. Eritrea is remarkably badly served, even by comparison with those other "troubled" spots on the African continent: eastern Congo, say, or Somalia.⁴ Indeed these are places which

⁴ For example: René Lemarchand, "Reflections on the Recent Historiography of Eastern Congo," *Journal of African History* 54–3 (2013), 417–437; Markus Hoehne and Virginia Luling (eds.), *Milk and Peace, Drought and War: Somali Culture, Society and Politics. Essays in Honour of I.M. Lewis* (New York: Hurst, 2010).

attract a great deal of research, although Somalia currently suffers from a level of presentism not dissimilar to that for Eritrea, and, likewise, northern Nigeria in the context of Boko Haram.⁵ Southern Africa – South Africa and Zimbabwe above all – has long been a crowded scholarly marketplace. When anything happens in Kenya, the analysts on hand are legion. It is doubtless unnecessary to point out, of course, that both northern Nigeria and southern Somalia share with Eritrea the hardy perennial of *access*, or the lack of it: it is, in short, impossible to do sustained fieldwork there, as a foreigner at least, without risking very unpleasant consequences. Journalists can parachute in, and get enough for a story; but not historians, or anthropologists.

But before we proceed further, it is time for some caveats. Although the tone of the piece is *critical*, in the broadest and (I hope) healthiest sense of that term, much of the work which features in the reflections to follow is indubitably excellent. It is important to emphasize at the outset that a great deal of the analysis – including that contained in policy-oriented and NGO documents – is based on real insight as well as fieldwork. Rather, my overriding interest is in balance and focus, and I write as a concerned historian.⁶ It is also essential to draw attention to the critical issue of methodology, and the problem of access. Eritrea has never been an easy place to do research. Personal connections have always been absolutely critical. Visiting researchers – at least those unwilling to sneak under the radar using a month-long tourist visa – face major bureaucratic hurdles; material is not always accessible, whether in ministries or in what is effectively the national archive, the Research and Documentation Centre. People do not want to talk much, unless the researcher is able to build up serious relationships and thus trust over time. Again, and as should be reiterated throughout, the regime has effectively decimated the scholarly community that was once taking shape within the country, not

⁵ Although see two reflective pieces by Murray Last: “From Dissent to Dissidence: The Genesis and Development of Reformist Islamic Groups in Northern Nigeria,” Nigeria Research Network Working Paper No. 5, University of Oxford (Oxford, 2011); Murray Last, “Contradictions in Creating a Jihadi Capital: Sokoto in the Nineteenth Century and its Legacy,” *African Studies Review* 56–2 (2013), 1–20.

⁶ But I also write as a somewhat hypocritical one, having myself dabbled in the black arts of contemporary analysis. Inevitably this essay is as much about self-examination as an examination of others – as all scholarly work is, of course, whether we like it or not. My *mea culpa* is that I am something of an interloper, a historian who has written for a range of think-tanks and NGOs, who has been as guiltily presentist (in outcome if not in intent) as anyone else, and who many years ago aspired to help build a dynamic and enduring History Department at the now effectively defunct University of Asmara but who failed miserably.

least through its *de facto* closure of the University of Asmara.⁷ Nonetheless, I will argue below that there *are* routes into Eritrea's past which are not contingent upon negotiating local access. Meanwhile the Eritrean scholarly and literary community itself, now largely abroad, can and must only grow, and does not necessarily have to negotiate "access" in the sense that the foreign researcher has to.

Whatever Walked There, Walked Alone: Analysts and Solipsists

In 2013, two strangely disconnected images of Eritrea loomed into public view. The first, in January, flickered briefly: this was the curious attempted *coup d'état* that never was, when a group of soldiers took over the Ministry of Information building for a few hours.⁸ They disrupted the normal TV broadcast, and the internet-fuelled rumour-mill went into overdrive: was this the beginning of the end? Regime change at last? What was happening? No-one could be sure, though as ever, in the age of much-vaunted "social media," that didn't prevent excited speculation. In any case, it all ended fairly swiftly: the soldiers gave themselves up, life in Asmara apparently went on as normal, and what media interest there had been quickly evaporated, though a small group of policy wonks and analysts of various hues would continue to speculate in the months that followed – much of their speculation protected by the Chatham House Rule.⁹

The tragic events of October 2013 received rather more prolonged coverage – that is, a few days – namely the terrible deaths of more than three hundred refugees and "economic migrants," drowned at sea when their rickety vessel caught fire and sank off the island of Lampedusa.¹⁰

⁷ I have not been able to travel to Eritrea since 2008, when it was demoralizing (and not a little infuriating) to be told by a senior figure at the offices of ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) that "what we need are good historians working on Eritrea," when the government had recently presided over the closure of a fledgling History Department at the University. Author's notes, Asmara, August 2008.

⁸ Jeffrey Gettleman, "Coup Attempt by Rebel Soldiers is Said to Fail in Eritrea," *New York Times*, 21 January 2013; Martin Plaut, "Seething Discontent in the Horn of Africa: Eritrea's Strange 'Coup,'" *New Statesman*, 23 January 2013.

⁹ Chatham House, home of the British Royal Institute of International Affairs, is a world-leading source of political analysis. The Chatham House Rule reads as follows: When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed (<http://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chathamhouserule>, accessed 4 April 2014).

¹⁰ "Italy boat sinking: hundreds feared dead off Lampedusa," BBC News, 3 October 2013.

Most of the dead were Eritrean and Somali. There was much focus on the human element to this dreadful modern tale, understandably enough; but very little attempt to link the Lampedusa calamity with the story of the occupation of the Information Ministry earlier in the year. Indeed, hardly any context was offered at all, as far as the author was aware: Somalia, perhaps, needed little, given its somewhat greater visibility. But Eritreans washing up on the southern shores of Europe occasioned little reflection, beyond the assumption – implicit, in most cases – that it must be a pretty terrible place to live.¹¹ Eritrea exists in a curious gloaming in terms of global public consciousness, occasionally poking through the mists of indifference because something grim or worrisome happens, and then vanishing again, doing whatever it does. “Whatever walked there,” to steal a quote from Shirley Jackson’s classic *The Haunting of Hill House*, “walked alone.”

Well, not quite, of course. Policy and humanitarian interest surges on a regular basis, and Eritrea remains a favorite of the human rights lobby. The country’s literary life takes on a particular vigour when it comes to the scrutiny of policy analysts and human rights activists. Amnesty International has been kept particularly busy over the last decade or so: a recent report on basic human rights is fairly typical,¹² and this was a follow-up to a more substantial and damning report published to coincide with the twentieth anniversary of formal Eritrean independence.¹³ Amnesty International regularly publishes stories highlighting the tragedies of refugees fleeing Eritrea – and in particular the steep rise of people trafficking through Sudan and Egypt – as well as the plight of those left behind.¹⁴ In 2009, Human Rights Watch produced an influential report which focused on prolonged military conscription, linking it to a wider culture of political oppression, and likewise regularly produces smaller reports, features and updates.¹⁵ In 2011, Human Rights Watch used the tenth anniversary of the 2001 clampdown to publish a report detailing the stories of the “September 2001 victims,” as well as subsequent human rights violations, and the nature of the state apparatus itself.¹⁶ While Amnesty International and Human

¹¹ For a partial exception to this general rule, see: Imogen Foulkes, “Lampedusa disaster: why men flee Eritrea,” BBC News, 5 October 2013.

¹² Amnesty International, “Eritrea: No Progress on Key Human Rights Concerns,” June 2013, available at <http://www.amnesty.org/fr/library/info/AFR64/007/2013/en>.

¹³ Amnesty International, *Eritrea: 20 Years of Independence But Still No Freedom* (London: Amnesty International, 2013).

¹⁴ See <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/eritrea?page=1>, accessed 12 November 2013.

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Service for Life: State Repression and Indefinite Conscription in Eritrea* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009). See also: <http://www.hrw.org/africa/eritrea>, accessed 12 November 2013.

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, *Ten Long Years: A Briefing on Eritrea’s Missing Political Prisoners* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2011).

Right Watch necessarily use anonymity to protect both authors and sources, a few have felt rather less need for such protection. Prominent among these is Kjetil Tronvoll, whose 2009 report, funded by organizations with agendas characterized by concerns for Christian mission, development, and human rights, replicated much of the material in the Human Rights Watch document in the same year.¹⁷ NGOs of various kinds are active in promoting this kind of work; their authors and consultants write texts in support of a particular position. This is not to say that this position is in itself *wrong* – by no means, for who could possibly object to the publicizing of human rights abuses? The point is rather the markedly narrow and ahistorical remit, and the powerful lobby which co-opts scholarship and sustains the particularly one-dimensional representation of Eritrea. There is, again, some first-rate analysis embedded within this material, of course, which is often produced by people with unparalleled experience on the ground; the lobby itself, moreover, is more difficult to “critique” than most, as most right-minded folk could scarcely find fault in the purpose. But it does maintain an oddly blocking presence in the public imaginary, in a sense controlling the flow – and certainly the type – of representation and analysis which pertains to Eritrea.

Humanitarian publishing has its counterpart in the policy world – somewhat more hard-headed, but still, often, driven by alternately humanitarian, developmental and economically neoliberal views of the world, and sometimes curious amalgams of all three. I must reiterate my *mea culpa*, which also masquerades as a claim to some expertise, as the author of an International Crisis Group report on Eritrea in 2010 (whose pessimistic conclusions were gustily rejected by the Eritrean government), and as editor of a volume on Eritrean foreign policy which assessed the roots and extent of its isolation.¹⁸ Whatever our intentions in writing it, such work – at least in the executive summary of it, and policy folk rarely go beyond that – can often serve, inadvertently or otherwise, to project a particularly frozen image of Eritrea, rather than a motion picture; and can fall into the trap of teleology, for in bespoke analysis tailored to policy audiences, what History

¹⁷ Kjetil Tronvoll, *The Lasting Struggle for Freedom in Eritrea: Human Rights and Political Development, 1991–2009* (Oslo: The Oslo Centre for Peace and Human Rights, 2009). Whether consciously or not, the title ironically echoed that of a much earlier collection of essays, cited in footnote 3 above, written in support of the liberation movement. See: Cliffe and Davidson, *The Long Struggle of Eritrea*. Tronvoll is now republishing his 2009 report, in only slightly modified form, in the format of a scholarly monograph: Kjetil Tronvoll and Daniel R. Mekonnen, *The African Garrison State: Human Rights and Political Developments in Eritrea* (Woodbridge: James Currey, forthcoming).

¹⁸ International Crisis Group, “Eritrea: The Siege State, Africa Report 163,” (September 2010); Richard Reid (ed.), *Eritrea’s External Relations: Understanding its Regional Role and Foreign Policy* (London: Chatham House, 2009).

there is, is too often written backwards. Be that as it may, International Crisis Group – an NGO financed by governments, institutional foundations and some private funding – has periodically focused its efforts on Eritrea specifically or on the Eritrea-Ethiopia relationship. A recent example is the stimulating report on the current situation inside Eritrea, hung on the hook of the January 2013 “mutiny,” and unabashedly focused on “future scenarios.”¹⁹ International Crisis Group also produced a study of the volatile impasse that is the ongoing relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia.²⁰ In line with International Crisis Group’s own mission statement, the tenor of the report reflected a belief that another round of fighting would be disastrous and must be avoided at all costs – a desire for “peace” being another central pillar of the policy industry – when in fact it might be argued that another war might bring about some kind of resolution, one way or the other. But violence is never condoned, of course, and there is never any alternative offered to the principle that “war is bad.” A similar notion underpins much of the work produced by Chatham House such as the report in 2007 by Sally Healy and Martin Plaut on the Eritrean-Ethiopian standoff.²¹ Arguably, however, if at least partial evidence was needed of the untenability of certain much-lauded “peace processes,” then it might be another extremely thorough Chatham House report by Healy, one of the most astute and experienced analysts of the Horn, dealing with various interconnected conflicts and the peace agreements put in place to resolve them.²² One reading of that report might be, indeed, that international brokerage can be rather more problematic than is accepted by the diplomatic corps, into whose DNA has been wired an unwavering commitment to “resolving” conflict.

There are many other actors in the booming policy and think-tank industry: Oxford Analytica, for example, which has produced detailed and incisive bespoke analyses, notably its work on Eritrea for the South African mining company AngloGold Ashanti;²³ or the South Africa-based Institute for Security Studies, which has published on the Eritrea-Djibouti conflict, among many other aspects of Eritrea and the Horn.²⁴ The Institute for

¹⁹ International Crisis Group, “Eritrea: Scenarios for Future Transition, Africa Report 200,” (March 2013).

²⁰ International Crisis Group, “Ethiopia and Eritrea: Preventing War, Africa Report 101,” (December 2005).

²¹ Sally Healy and Martin Plaut, *Ethiopia and Eritrea: Allergic to Persuasion* (London: Chatham House, 2007).

²² Sally Healy, *Lost Opportunities in the Horn of Africa: How Conflicts Connect and Peace Agreements Unravel* (London: Chatham House, 2008).

²³ For example Oxford Analytica, “The Red Sea Region: Geopolitical and Security Risks and Implications for Eritrea,” (18 June 2010).

²⁴ Institute for Security Studies Situation Report, “The Eritrea-Djibouti Border Dispute,” (15 September 2008).

Security Studies asserts that it is “an African organization which aims to enhance human security by providing independent and authoritative research, expert policy analysis and advice,” and many such organizations promote themselves in similar CNN-ese “inside track,” “cutting edge,” and “as it happens.” It is, after all, an increasingly competitive marketplace, and the “inside track,” immediately achieved, is the critical selling point. Thus does Eritrea flit across the pages of reports and briefings – digging for gold one minute, shooting at Djiboutian soldiers the next; locking up political prisoners here, preparing for another war with Ethiopia there. These publications are tailored to particular audiences, who are often also their funders: the foreign affairs departments of individual governments, security advisors, the European Union, commercial concerns. “Clients” want to know, and in the most succinct of terms, what has happened recently (and keep the history bit particularly brief); what’s the situation now; what’s going to happen in the future. Sometimes the concern is with security – will the place blow?; or with economics – is it safe to invest?

These kinds of outputs proliferate – and certainly echo loudly – in the space which would normally be rather busier with scholarly debate. Yet turning to more overtly academic work, once more we find an overwhelmingly presentist, ahistorical focus, and critical assessments of the current regime form the lion’s share of scholarly output on Eritrea.²⁵ Some of my own writing falls into this broad category.²⁶ Again, some unquestionably excellent work has been done: that by Tanja Müller is among the most penetrating, in its concentration on education and social change, and in many ways exemplifies the best kind of anthropological

²⁵ For an earlier assessment of this trend, see: Richard Reid, “Traumatic Transitions: Open Season on the Eritrean State,” *African Affairs* 421 (2006), 637–644. I have deliberately omitted anything produced in Ethiopia or by Ethiopians, the position of which is broadly predictable. Early instances include Addis Birhan’s transparently titled *Eritrea: A Problem Child of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Marran Books, 1998), and the equally polemical Medhane Tadesse, *The Eritrean-Ethiopian War: Retrospect and Prospects* (Addis Ababa: [publisher unknown], 1999), both of which depict Eritrea as simultaneously nasty, unstable, and ungrateful. Most locally-produced work has since said much the same thing. One of the few reasonably balanced scholarly efforts in recent years which deals with the Eritrean liberation struggle is: Gebru Tareke, *The Ethiopian Revolution: War in the Horn of Africa* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2009).

²⁶ For example: Richard Reid, “Caught in the Headlights of History: Eritrea, the EPLF and the Postwar Nation-State,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 43–3 (2005), 467–488; Richard Reid, “The Politics of Silence: Interpreting Apparent Stasis in Contemporary Eritrea,” *Review of African Political Economy* 120 (2009), 209–221. I have tried to make amends in my *Frontiers of Violence in Northeast Africa: Genealogies of Conflict since c. 1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

approach to fieldwork in Eritrea.²⁷ David Bozzini has dealt in detail with internal state security and conscription, and Victoria Bernal with the diaspora and cyberspace.²⁸ Tricia Redeker Hepner has produced one of the most eloquent and insightful studies of contemporary Eritrea in recent years in her book on the liberation struggle and the diaspora, and how experiences of both continue to shape Eritrea today.²⁹ Redeker Hepner has also teamed up with fellow anthropologist David O’Kane to edit a volume which showcases some very fine contemporary ethnographic fieldwork on Eritrea, much of it highlighting the stresses resulting from prolonged militarization, economic collapse, social desolation, and the flight of refugees.³⁰ Of particular significance is Marcus Treiber’s work on migration and urban youth.³¹ It is worth adding here, of course, that much of the actual fieldwork underpinning this scholarship was undertaken, in the most recent cases, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and would not be possible today for foreigners, although the Eritrean anthropologist Abbebe Kifleyesus remains active in the field.³² Meanwhile, among

²⁷ Most recently see: Tanja Müller, “Beyond the Siege State: Tracing Hybridity during a Recent Visit to Eritrea,” *Review of African Political Economy* 133 (2012), 451–464; Tanja Müller, “Human Resource Development and the State: Higher Education in Post-Revolutionary Eritrea,” in: David O’Kane and Tricia Redeker Hepner (eds.), *Biopolitics, Militarism and Development: Eritrea in the Twenty-First Century* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 2009), 53–71. See also her earlier monograph: Tanja Müller, *The Making of Elite Women: Revolution and Nation-Building in Eritrea* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

²⁸ David Bozzini, “Low-tech State Surveillance: The Production of Uncertainty among Conscripts in Eritrea,” *Surveillance and Society* 9–1/2 (2011), 93–113; Victoria Bernal, “Eritrea On-Line: Diaspora, Cyberspace, and the Public Sphere,” *American Ethnologist* 32–4 (2005), 660–675; Victoria Bernal, “Diaspora, Cyberspace and Political Imagination: the Eritrean Diaspora Online,” *Global Networks* 6–2 (2006), 161–179.

²⁹ Tricia Redeker Hepner, *Soldiers, Martyrs, Traitors, and Exiles: Political Conflict in Eritrea and the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

³⁰ David O’Kane and Tricia Redeker Hepner (eds.), *Biopolitics, Militarism and Development: Eritrea in the Twenty-First Century* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 2009).

³¹ Marcus Treiber, “Trapped in Adolescence: The Postwar Urban Generation,” in: David O’Kane and Tricia Redeker Hepner (eds.), *Biopolitics, Militarism and Development: Eritrea in the Twenty-First Century* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 2009), 92–114; Marcus Treiber, “Dreaming of a Good Life: Young Urban Refugees from Eritrea between Refusal of Politics and Political Asylum,” in: Hans-Peter Hahn and Georg Klute (eds.), *Cultures of Migration: African Perspectives* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2007), 239–260; Marcus Treiber, “Lessons for Life: Two Migratory Portraits from Eritrea,” in: Alessandro Triulzi and Robert McKenzie (eds.), *Long Journeys: African Migrants on the Road* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 187–212.

³² See for example: Abbebe Kifleyesus, “Folk-Fairs and Festivals: Cultural Conservation and National Identity Formation in Eritrea,” *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines* 186 (2007), 249–276.

the most trenchant of the Eritrean government's recent critics is Dan Connell, seasoned journalist, writer, and activist on the Horn of Africa, and once – during the late 1970s and 1980s – a veritable champion of the Eritrean cause, and one who was certainly seen to be close to the Eritrean leadership.³³ Connell has subsequently produced a series of highly critical assessments of the regime's contemporary political culture,³⁴ although arguably his finest achievement is his collection of compelling interviews with several senior government figures, who had themselves become critical of the President, shortly before their arrest and disappearance in 2001.³⁵ This volume is in effect a major sourcebook on modern Eritrea.

If the line between personal experience and dispassionate analysis is sometimes blurred in the case of foreigners' work, it is naturally much more so in that of Eritreans themselves. Needless to say, some of the fiercest critics have been Eritreans living abroad, and writing as scholars or memoirists, or both. In many cases they have been displaced by the recent violent closure of whatever space there once was in Eritrea for scholarly reflection and debate in Eritrea itself; others, of course, belong to the rather older diaspora, forced into exile by the Ethiopian *Derg* regime in the 1970s and 1980s. Thus Kidane Mengisteab and Okbazghi Yohannes, both based in the US, produced a wide-ranging indictment of post-independence Eritrea,³⁶ though this volume was dwarfed by the two enormous tomes authored by the UK-based Gaim Kibreab – the first volume concerned with the liberation

³³ Dan Connell has brought together a number of his earlier writings in two volumes: *Taking on the Superpowers: Collected Articles on the Eritrean Revolution (1976–1982), volume I* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 2003); and *Building a New Nation: Collected Articles on the Eritrean Revolution (1983–2002), volume II* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 2004). See also his earlier *Against All Odds*.

³⁴ A sample would include: Dan Connell, "Inside the EPLF: The Origins of the 'People's Party' and its Role in the Liberation of Eritrea," *Review of African Political Economy* 89 (2001), 345–364; Dan Connell, "Eritrea: On a Slow Fuse," in: Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *Battling Terrorism in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge/Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 64–92; Dan Connell, "The EPLF/PFDJ Experience: How it Shapes Eritrea's Regional Strategy," in: Richard Reid (ed.), *Eritrea's External Relations: Understanding its Regional Role and Foreign Policy* (London: Chatham House, 2009), 24–44.

³⁵ Dan Connell, *Conversations with Eritrean Political Prisoners* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 2005).

³⁶ Kidane Mengisteab and Okbazghi Yohannes, *Anatomy of an African Tragedy: Political, Economic and Foreign Policy Crisis in Post-Independence Eritrea* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 2005). See also: Kidane Mengisteab, "What Has Gone Wrong with Eritrea's Foreign Relations?," in: Richard Reid (ed.), *Eritrea's External Relations: Understanding its Regional Role and Foreign Policy* (London: Chatham House, 2009), 45–70.

war, and the second with independent Eritrea.³⁷ Kibreab's work amounted to arguably the most detailed recent critique of the EPLF; it is certainly one of the most detailed assessments of Eritrea's modern trajectory. More recently he has honed in on the issue of indefinite national service which has effectively enslaved an entire generation of young Eritreans and which has so damaged the country economically and politically.³⁸ Other assessments of particular aspects of Eritrea's performance as an independent nation – if not perhaps quite as openly hostile as the positions adopted by Kibreab or Mengisteab – include Yohannes Gebremedhin's analysis of legal developments, and specifically the EPLF's somewhat cavalier attitude toward the idea of the rule of law,³⁹ and Amanuel Mehreteab's assessment of the challenges facing, and ultimately the failings of, the postwar demobilization programmes in the 1990s.⁴⁰ Amanuel Mehreteab, in particular, knew of what he wrote: an ex-EPLF fighter himself, he was heavily involved in those demobilization schemes, and therefore scholarly treatise is to some extent overlaid with personal experience and life history. This is certainly true of Bereket Habte Selassie's account of the failures of the current regime, a trenchant critique embedded in his autobiography. Habte Selassie himself has long been a leading figure in Eritrean politics – both in Eritrea and in the Diaspora – if not an uncontroversial one, and naturally enough he is never far from the action in his critique of the EPLF.⁴¹

A crucial stipulation is necessary at this stage. In no way is the commentary up to this point seeking to argue that the issue of human rights, for example, is not a legitimate issue for public concern. No-one but the most diehard of government loyalists (and there are still a few) currently regards the regime as anything other than brutal and authoritarian, with an increasingly gratuitous and violent disregard for the welfare of its own citizens, and gripped by an ossifying and pathological paranoia, both internally and externally directed. Inevitably, and in the manner of a self-fulfilling cycle, such a regime will indeed attract the kind of attention which it professedly abhors, and for which it is ultimately responsible. The central point, rather, is that the material which frames Eritrea in the terms

³⁷ Gaim Kibreab, *Critical Reflections on the Eritrean War of Independence: Social Capital, Associational Life, Religion, Ethnicity and Sowing Seeds of Dictatorship* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 2008); Gaim Kibreab, *Eritrea: A Dream Deferred* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2009).

³⁸ For example, see: Gaim Kibreab, "Forced Labour in Eritrea," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 47–1 (2009), 41–72.

³⁹ Yohannes Gebremedhin, *The Challenges of a Society in Transition: Legal Development in Eritrea* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 2004).

⁴⁰ Amanuel Mehreteab, *Wake Up, Hanna! Reintegration and Reconstruction Challenges for Post-War Eritrea* (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 2004).

⁴¹ Bereket Habte Selassie, *Wounded Nation: How a Once Promising Eritrea was Betrayed and its Future Compromised* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 2011).

described above is overwhelming in its volume, and the literature sampled ultimately tells but one segment of the story – a segment which, however terrible in its human significance, feeds and is fed by a presentist and self-sustaining industry of policy analysis and humanitarianism, an industry which pursues a narrow range of loosely-related agendas.

To be sure, the industry itself flourishes in the absence of more in-depth scholarly work. So why *is* there so little explanatory, contextual analysis? Why is there so little *history*? A significant part of the answer, again, lies in the regime's own hostility to scholarly research in general, and to history in particular, resulting in an epistemological blackout which has very much shaped the focus and form of outsiders' interpretation of the country: the EPLF leadership, in other words, is simultaneously the cause of an ahistorical ontology – having canonized its own narrative – and the sole focus of outside interest. But another part of the answer lies in the increasing tendency toward immediacy and presentism in the academy itself, and a conviction that the only work of any real value is the stuff that is contemporary, or at least modern, and which can be used by the kinds of consumers discussed above. Ironically, perhaps, in view of the methodological challenges discussed at the outset of this paper, it is somehow easier – and certainly apparently more compelling – to produce work which essentially critiques contemporary Eritrea, than it is to produce dynamic historical research which is compelling to readers of all kinds, and which makes the contemporary comprehensible and, importantly, meaningful. The latter, indeed, is nowadays seemingly an increasingly tedious, even antiquarian, project.

By definition the preoccupation of contemporary policy analysis and what we might term “shallow history” is with the liberation struggle – especially its later stages, dominated as it is by the supposedly inexorable rise, and eventual triumph, of the EPLF – and its aftermath, that is to say, political culture since 1991. This is an ongoing concern of much recent scholarship, too, in which the liberation war has been either the primary focus or at least the centrepiece of the narrative.⁴² For many, indeed, this is the point at which Eritrea becomes a living, recognisable entity,⁴³ and this is reflected in the arena of literature and memoir. There is not, admittedly, a lot to go on in this sphere, but it is useful to reflect for a moment on what there is.

The liberation war itself in the 1970s and 1980s tragically depleted a generation of artists and intellectuals in Eritrea, just as the prolonged,

⁴² For example: Kibreab, *Critical Reflections*; Redie Bereketeab, *Eritrea: The Making of a Nation, 1890–1991* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 2007); Awet Weldemichael, “The Eritrean Long March: The Strategic Withdrawal of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), 1978–79,” *Journal of Military History* 73–4 (2009), 1231–1271; Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopian Revolution*.

⁴³ Author's notes, Asmara, August-September 2006.

if at times low-level, crisis since 1998 has gutted the cultural space; this is a nation punctured by war, with so many stories but few opportunities to tell them. The toll on the capacity for self-expression and self-representation has been enormous. Literary culture more broadly has withered on the vine somewhat, despite the best efforts of Alemseged Tesfai – arguably Eritrea’s finest living writer, having produced history, memoir, poetry, plays and prose – whose powerful *Two Weeks in the Trenches*, for example, contains personal recollections, short stories, and two plays,⁴⁴ while Hidri, the publication wing of the ruling People’s Front for Democracy and Justice, has sponsored collections of writings which demonstrate what might yet be possible. One, a book of contemporary poetry in Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic, with translations in English, was under the editorship of Ghirmai Negash and his long-standing US collaborator, Charles Cantalupo; many of the poems, naturally enough, deal with war, loss, and national sovereignty.⁴⁵ Another was a set of plays by three ex-fighters – Solomon Dirar, Esaias Tseggai, and Mesgun Zerai – dealing with the themes of war and nationalism, and produced under the auspices of the University of Leeds where the writers took MA degrees in theatre studies.⁴⁶

Yet more generally, silence is the hallmark of Eritrean political culture, and this has had a major impact on literary culture. There is no Museveni-style memoir from Isaias himself, no “mustard seed” being sown, no collected statements or expositions; there is no revelatory memoir by some long-suffering member of Isaias’s government – only the grim testimony of those who have managed to escape, recorded by human rights activists. It is remarkable that in over twenty years of independence there has been so little on life under Isaias, or even – stretching back forty years to the foundation of the EPLF itself – on life in the movement during the struggle, with a handful of exceptions noted below. The problem, of course, is that most of the key figures who might have produced written accounts “from the inside” were incarcerated in the 2001 clampdown, and many are now dead. The heart of the movement was ripped out, and along with it the potential for insider insights; fortunately, for posterity, we have Dan Connell’s gripping interviews with several of them, just prior to their arrest; as time passes, those interviews only become more valuable, the voices in them more haunting.⁴⁷

Again, however, the rare exceptions need to be noted. Once more Alemseged Tesfai merits attention, for his inclusion of personal stories in a recent literary collection.⁴⁸ One of the very few liberation war memoirs is

⁴⁴ Notably his *Two Weeks in the Trenches: Reminiscences of Childhood and War in Eritrea* (Lawrenceville NJ: Red Sea Press, 2002).

⁴⁵ Ghirmai Negash and Charles Cantalupo (eds.), *Who Needs a Story? Contemporary Eritrean Poetry in Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic* (Asmara: Hidri Publishers, 2005).

⁴⁶ Jane Plastow (ed.), *Three Eritrean Plays* (Asmara: Hidri Publishers, 2006).

⁴⁷ Connell, *Eritrean Political Prisoners*.

⁴⁸ Tesfai, *Two Weeks in the Trenches*.

that of the medical professional Tekeste Fekadu, whose two volumes (the second of which was published by Hidri, owned by the PFDJ) are all the more remarkable for their rarity.⁴⁹ With the partial exception of Alemseged, no other fighter has written anything, or at least written for an English-language publisher with a large audience in mind. Not even the redoubtable Red Sea Press, which under the dynamic leadership of Kassahun Checole has brought to the reading public so much material that would otherwise have disappeared from view, has been able to achieve that. There are of course self-published books which contain a mixture of history and memoir – Bocreption Haile’s “eye-witness history” of Eritrea, for example, or Mellese Woldeselassie’s account of the deportations from Ethiopia⁵⁰ – but these are difficult to get hold of and in the end hardly visible literary products. At the other end of the scale – indeed really in a league of their own – are the published memoirs of Bereket Habte Selassie, noted earlier in discussing contemporary analysis.⁵¹ Something of a controversial figure in certain quarters, Bereket’s books nonetheless stand as something of a unique accomplishment in Eritrean literary culture – that is, an autobiography by a leading Eritrean political and intellectual figure – and are a rich resource for future scholars. Nonetheless his name arouses derision in Eritrean government circles for his putatively self-obsessed posturing, as indeed does the name of any Eritrean scholar abroad who dares to go into print.⁵² In large part, of course, this is – obviously enough – because most of these writers are critics, and the overwhelming focus, or at least the centrepiece of the narratives being produced, is the liberation struggle and the supposed betrayal of its goals and indeed its achievements by the EPLF.

In the end, of course, all of these authors – whether Eritrean or foreign – are butting against the strident anti-intellectualism of the EPLF itself. Intellectuals – and there have always been quite a few in the Eritrean diaspora – were useful only up to a point, to give gravitas to the struggle at some important forum, or at particularly key moments in the political battle. But they were disposable. They were not fighters. They spoke learnedly about political and economic development, constitutional issues, legal systems; but for the EPLF leadership they really knew nothing about life in the Field, didn’t understand the core values of the liberation movement,

⁴⁹ Tekeste Fekadu, *Journey from Nakfa to Nakfa: Back to Square One, 1976–79* (Asmara: [publisher unknown], 2002); Tekeste Fekadu, *The Tenacity and Resilience of Eritrea 1979–1983* (Asmara: Hidri, 2008).

⁵⁰ Bocreption Haile, *The Collusion on Eritrea* (Asmara: [publisher unknown], 2000); Mellese Woldeselassie, *Deportation of Eritreans from Ethiopia, a Lesson to the World: An Eye Witness Account of the Ethiopian Style Ethnic Cleansing* (Asmara: [publisher unknown], 2000).

⁵¹ *Wounded Nation* was preceded by: Bereket Habte Selassie, *The Crown and the Pen: The Memoirs of a Lawyer Turned Rebel* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 2007).

⁵² Author field notes, Asmara, August 2008.

its sense of sacrifice and brotherhood. They were on the outside – usually literally as well as figuratively, as most lived in Europe and North America, and in fact only a relative handful came back to live in Eritrea after independence. All of this was reflected in the University of Asmara. It would be a service centre for government, not a centre of intellectual excellence, and even then it was considerably less important than the military training complex at Sawa in the western lowlands. Because the EPLF did not trust intellectuals, it could hardly be expected that the University would receive anything approaching the kind of support it needed. The National Museum in Asmara, meanwhile, was similarly isolated and utilized as an extension of state power.⁵³ Almost inevitably, then, everyone is a critic, or ends up being one – or certainly most of those who have written on contemporary Eritrea in the last decade or so, whether Eritrean or foreigner.⁵⁴

So the published personal memoir or testimony is a rare thing indeed. Leaving aside the question of literacy, this may reflect a deeper cultural reticence, but it certainly reflects a liberation-fighter culture in which one does not speak of the *self*, which would be boastful and distastefully individualistic. Only the collective matters. This is combined with an abiding, unspoken loyalty to the struggle, the movement, the experience of the field, and the memory of those who died – the “martyrs” – which precludes public speaking about it, because no amount of self-centred “My Story”-type narrative could ever do justice to the real experience of the struggle. The result is a curious literary wasteland, where tumbleweed blows past rows of silent, stoical men and women who appear to know deep secrets but will never tell them – and certainly not to foreigners, or to foreign publishers.

From *Shifta* to *Sha’abiya*, c. 1940–1970: A Case for Access and Ancestry

If contemporary Eritrea is glimpsed through a series of epilepsy-inducing flashing images, mostly horrendous, then Eritrea’s past can be discerned only in a grainy half-light, a murky gloaming in which only the dimmest of shapes and shadows are perceived. What insights that are available to us are the result of the labors of a small – and, alas, dwindling – group of scholars. For once, I am not exhorting historians to look to the precolonial past for redemption, although it is worth observing how rare is work on Eritrea’s precolonial history, obviously reflecting scholarly trends more broadly: the author’s own work aside, mention needs to be made of Jonathan Miran’s

⁵³ Peter Schmidt, “Postcolonial Silencing, Intellectuals, and the State: Views from Eritrea,” *African Affairs* 435 (2010), 293–313.

⁵⁴ A notable exception – there should be at least one – is the self-described “journalist” Thomas C. Mountain, whose impassioned pro-Eritrean Government and anti-US rants might best be considered idiosyncratic. See the website <http://www.intrepidreport.com> for examples.

outstanding study of Massawa, the pioneering work of archaeologists Peter Schmidt *et al.* on Eritrea in antiquity, and a special issue of the sporadic *Eritrean Studies Review* published in 2007 dealing explicitly with “Eritrea on the Eve of European Colonial Rule,” guest edited by Bairu Tafla.⁵⁵ And then there is the Italian period, on which so much more needs to be done, despite something of a resurgence in Italian scholarly interest in the Horn of Africa in the late 1990s and early 2000s.⁵⁶ Francesca Locatelli’s work on social and urban history has a particular focus on Asmara during Italian colonial rule.⁵⁷ Indeed Locatelli has been one of only a relatively small group of Italian historians working on Eritrea during Italian rule, and writing in English. Among other recent work, Federica Guazzini, Isabella Rosoni, and Massimo Zaccaria deserve particular mention;⁵⁸ and James de Lorenzi has recently worked on missionaries in Eritrea and Ethiopia during the Italian period.⁵⁹ Yet even in

⁵⁵ My own output in this context includes: Reid, *Frontiers of Violence*; Richard Reid, “War and Remembrance: Orality, Literacy and Conflict in the Horn,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 18–1 (2006), 89–103; Richard Reid, “The Trans-Mereb Experience: Perceptions of the Historical Relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 1–2 (2007), 238–255. By Jonathan Miran, see: *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009). For recent archaeological work, see: Peter R. Schmidt, Matthew C. Curtis and Zelalem Tekla (eds.), *The Archaeology of Ancient Eritrea* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 2008). See also the special issue of the *Eritrean Studies Review* 5–1 (2007).

⁵⁶ This culminated in a cluster of pioneering work. See, for example: Giulia Barrera, *Dangerous Liaisons: Colonial Concubinage in Eritrea, 1890–1941* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University African Studies Working Papers, 1996); Silvana Palma, *L’Italia Coloniale* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1999); Federica Guazzini, *Le Ragioni di un Confine Colonial: Eritrea 1898–1908* (Turin: L’Harmattan Italia, 1999).

⁵⁷ Francesca Locatelli, “Oziosi, Vagabondi e Pregiudicati: Labour, Law and Crime in Colonial Asmara, 1890–1941,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 40–2 (2007), 225–250; Francesca Locatelli, “Beyond the Campo Cintato: Prostitutes, Migrants and ‘Criminals’ in Colonial Asmara (Eritrea), 1890–1941,” in: Francesca Locatelli and Paul Nugent (eds.), *African Cities: Competing Claims on Urban Spaces* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 219–240.

⁵⁸ Federica Guazzini was guest editor of a special issue of *Northeast African Studies* 10–3 (2003), dealing with “The Horn of Africa between History, Law and Politics.” For Massimo Zaccaria, see: “Italian Approaches to Economic Resources in the Red Sea Region,” *Eritrean Studies Review* 5–1 (2007), 113–155; Massimo Zaccaria, *Anch’io per la tua Bandiera: Il V Battaglione Ascari in Missione sul Fronte Libico (1912)* (Ravenna: Giorgio Pozzi Editore, 2013). Isabella Rosoni’s monograph also deals with the early period of Italian administration: *La Colonia Eritrea: La Prima Amministrazione Coloniale Italiana (1880–1912)* (Macerata: Edizioni Università di Macerata, 2006).

⁵⁹ James de Lorenzi, “Missionaries and the Making of Colonial Notables: Conversions to Modernity in Eritrea and Ethiopia,” in: Heather Sharkey (ed.), *Cultural Conversions: Unexpected Consequences of Christian Missionary Encounters in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 2013), 157–175.

the Italian academy it might be said that Ethiopia casts a rather more overbearing shadow, even when, as in the case of Alessandro Triulzi's work, some of this is important for understanding aspects of Eritrea's past.⁶⁰ More generally, however, Italian historians tend not to publish their work in the mainstream English-language academic journals, regrettably. Furthermore, it might be suggested that Eritrea is neglected in historical terms because it lies outside both the Anglophone (the British Military Administration from 1941 to 1952 excepted) and the Francophone spheres, and therefore is seen as somehow marginal to the great sweep of colonial-era-dominated modern Africanist history. There is certainly a tendency in the Anglophone academy to see the Italian territories as largely irrelevant – as well as, of course, being off-limits *vis-à-vis* most scholars' linguistic skills. Only occasionally does Italian imperialism – in the manner of John Mackenzie's wide-ranging approach to the British variant – come to the attention of a wider (English-speaking) audience, as in the case of Giuseppe Finaldi's recent, very fine, book.⁶¹ Uoldelul Chelati, representative of a new generation of Eritrean historians abroad – in his case based in Italy – has produced work which signals the enormous potential for research on the Italian impact on Eritrea, particularly in terms of national identity.⁶²

Both the nineteenth century and the Italian “moment” are fertile fields of enquiry, to be sure. However, I want to make the case for a particular passage of historical play, as it were, the critical generational shift between c. 1940 and c. 1970 – a markedly important period across much of Africa, indeed.⁶³ I realize, again, that I do so in at least partial defiance of my own exhortation for a longer *durée* approach to African history, and certainly to that of the Horn of Africa.⁶⁴ But I make an exception in this article on the grounds that in the Eritrean case the 1940–1970 “moment” is of especial significance, owing to the enduring relevance of the issues which defined it – issues which should be of ongoing interest to observers, analysts and

⁶⁰ See, for example: Alessandro Triulzi, “The Past as Contested Terrain: Commemorating New Sites of Memory in War-Torn Ethiopia,” in: Preben Kaarsholm (ed.), *Violence, Political Culture and Development in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2006), 122–138.

⁶¹ Giuseppe M. Finaldi, *Italian National Identity in the Scramble for Africa: Italy's African Wars in the Era of Nation-Building, 1870–1900* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009).

⁶² Uoldelul Chelati, “Colonialism and the Construction of National Identities: The Case of Eritrea,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 1–2 (2007), 256–276.

⁶³ For one of the most eloquent expositions of this, see Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁶⁴ In addition to the rationale behind *Frontiers of Violence*, see: Richard Reid, “Past and Presentism: The “Precolonial” and the Foreshortening of African History,” *Journal of African History* 52–2 (2011), 135–155.

actors of all hues, as I explain below – and the potential which unencumbered research on the period has for Eritrea’s prospects as a democratic, pluralistic society. It encompasses the turbulent 1940s, the period of a threadbare British Military Administration, and the opening of political debate about Eritrea’s essential character, its prospects as an autonomous or even independent state, and its relationship with Ethiopia; the federation with Ethiopia, set up by international agreement in 1952, an unhappy and ultimately unworkable arrangement brought forcibly to a close by Ethiopia’s annexation of Eritrea in 1962; and the 1960s, characterized by the escalation of the liberation war led by the predominantly Muslim Eritrean Liberation Front as well as the divisions within it, which culminated in its violent split and the emergence of what became the EPLF in the early 1970s. The import of the era has been demonstrated by some recent scholarly interventions: not least, again, that of Alemseged Tesfai – for a number of years the “unofficial” historian of the liberation movement with an office in the Research and Documentation Centre and a blessing from above to produce historical work on Eritrea – who produced his mammoth work on Eritrea in the violence and division of the 1940s and 1950s which remains, sadly, available only in Tigrinya.⁶⁵ Outside Eritrea, Joseph Venosa has likewise recently done some exciting work on the period, with a particular focus on the role of Islam and early Eritrean nationalism;⁶⁶ and Fouad Makki’s longer-term historical framing of the 1940s is noteworthy.⁶⁷ But the vitality of the period is also demonstrated by a larger corpus of rather older scholarship, some of it cited below, which needs to be revisited and re-examined.

Yet of course this is also a period characterized by dynamics which are (like much of Eritrean history, indeed) inseparable from developments in Ethiopia itself. As I suggested at the beginning of the paper, my argument is not for some kind of “patriotic history” of Eritrea which seals the latter hermetically and severs its past from that of its neighbors, Ethiopia included; that would be absurd. Throughout the 1940–1970 period, Eritrean actors – particularly in the highlands – both responded to developments in Ethiopia, and themselves shaped attitudes and actions in Ethiopia. Eritrean lowlanders’ as well as Muslim highlanders’ political

⁶⁵ Alemseged Tesfai, *Aynefalale* (Asmara: Hidri Publishers, 2001). The title means “let us not divide.”

⁶⁶ Joseph Venosa, “‘Because God has Given Us the Power of Reasoning’: Intellectuals, the Eritrean Muslim League, and Nationalist Activism, 1946–50,” *Northeast African Studies* 12–2 (2013), 29–62; Joseph Venosa, *Paths Toward the Nation: Islam, Community, and Early Nationalist Mobilization in Eritrea, 1941–1961* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2014).

⁶⁷ Fouad Makki, “Subaltern Agency and Nationalist Commitment: The Dialectics of Social and National Emancipation in Colonial Eritrea,” *Africa Today* 58–1 (2011), 29–52.

and cultural outlooks in this period were likewise indelibly intertwined with events in Sudan. Eritrean history is, in sum, inseparable from that of the wider region; if it were not so, its current situation might be rather different, not to say happier. But my point is rather that Eritrea's past *does* need scrutiny in a way that does not relegate it to mere supplement of Ethiopian history, with the focus on the "internal" dynamics – with due recognition of a range of "external" influences and interactions – which have shaped the recent past.

There are a number of reasons, then, for my selection of this particular "moment." To begin with, it seeks to break with a historical horizon dominated by the EPLF. As pointed out earlier, this domination is of course in large part the product of the government's own strategy, the manifestation of its stridently militarized approach to state and society and thus its hostility to intellectual endeavors that seek to challenge that approach. At the same time, much of the foregoing discussion has made clear just how the recent past – the era of the *sha'abiya*, as the EPLF is popularly known⁶⁸ – dominates the writing on Eritrea, in whatever genre. This history blockage stems in part from a teleological interpretation of the EPLF itself: i.e., that the only history that matters is the stuff that appears to lead inexorably to the rise of the EPLF and, ultimately, the current "crisis." It is not so much a case of history being written by the "victors" – though of course there is an element of that – as one of the latter making themselves so awful that no-one can remember, or cares much, what came before. There is also something of a personality cult in the obsession with Isaias Afewerki himself, who fascinates and horrifies in the way that African leaders usually do, and who is – as an informant once put it to me – the leader of the opposition as well as the president of Eritrea.⁶⁹

Next, there is the issue of accessibility, an important one in all realms of historical enquiry but an especially urgent and problematic one in the Eritrean context. The period between 1940 and 1970 is, in relative terms, richly accessible. The British archival record for the 1940s and 1950s in particular is extensive.⁷⁰ The Trevaskis papers in Oxford remain underutilized.⁷¹ There is also a relatively rich literary inheritance – newspapers and pamphlets, mostly – from the period, to some extent in English, but also in

⁶⁸ *Sha'abiya* has long been shorthand for the movement – both pejorative and otherwise – and means "popular" or "of the people."

⁶⁹ Author's notes, Asmara, September 2006.

⁷⁰ For example, the WO (War Office) 230 series, and the FO (Foreign Office) 371 series in the UK National Archives in London are especially pertinent.

⁷¹ MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 546, held at the Bodleian Library at Rhodes House. G.K.N. Trevaskis was attached to the UN commission in Eritrea in the late 1940s, and was an astute and prescient analyst of the territory: see his published work, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960).

Tigrinya and Arabic.⁷² The Ethiopian archives, too, may offer rich pickings to the assiduous (and patient) researcher. Most exhilarating of all, perhaps, is the fact that the potential for oral history is enormous, although it is an increasingly urgent issue as the generation born between the 1920s and 1940s begins to dwindle. But many of that generation now reside outside Eritrea, mostly in Europe and North America, and the prospects for extensive interviewing are exciting indeed, despite the painful memories which the years of the federation and the aftermath of its abolition invoke in many Eritreans.

Above all, there is the question of relevancy. This is a period that allows historians to meaningfully enter the discussion about the shape and making of modern Eritrea, to make a significant contribution to an understanding of Eritrea today, and to wrestle the debate away from the policy people, the presentists, the *sha'abiya* aficionados. And there are several key points of relevance. There is the issue of Islam and social reformism, the links between which form the roots of the national liberation struggle itself in the 1940s. Much of this has been marginalized from the political debate owing to the triumph of the EPLF over its predecessor and rival, the ELF, during the civil war between the two movements in the 1970s and early 1980s, and the consequent dominance of the EPLF leadership's vision of the past. The original agitation for social and political reform in Eritrea came from the peasant ("serf") movement in the overwhelmingly Muslim western lowlands and northern mountains in the 1940s, and many of the key agitators – including one of the preeminent nationalist leaders, Ibrahim Sultan – drew on popular Islamic reformism as a cornerstone of their particular nationalism. They thus hitched their fortunes to those of the early separatist nationalism of the Muslim League, one of the key political parties of the 1940s and 1950s, and these linkages created the essential preconditions for armed struggle. The ELF, founded in 1960 by a group of Muslim leaders in exile in Cairo, and which was in its early years at least an overwhelmingly Muslim organization, grew out of this network of alliances, especially in the western lowlands and the northern mountains. In other words, the roots of early nationalism and social reformism lie in a popular form of Islam – and the ELF, not the EPLF, inherited that original social and political radicalism.⁷³ The national liberation movement, broadly

⁷² See, for example: Lloyd Ellingson, "The Emergence of Political Parties in Eritrea, 1941–1950," *Journal of African History* 18–2 (1977), 261–281; Bereketeab, *Eritrea*. For a sample of writing by the prominent political activist of the 1940s and 1950s, Woldeab Woldemariam – to some, the "father of Eritrean nationalism" – see: Tuquabo Aressi (ed.), *Mrutzat Anketzat Ato Woldeab* [Selected Articles of Ato Woldeab] 1941–1991 (Asmara: Hidri Publishers, 1995).

⁷³ David Pool, *From Guerrillas to Government: the Eritrean People's Liberation Front* (Oxford: James Currey, 2001); Jordan Gebre-Medhin, *Peasants and Nationalism in Eritrea: A Critique of Ethiopian Studies* (Trenton NJ: Red Sea Press, 1989). Again, see also: Trevaskis, *Eritrea*.

defined, thus has a rather more complex genealogy than that represented by the EPLF, with its emphasis on secular unity (though in reality the key leaders were from the Christian highlands) and on the vision of the EPLF as the harbinger of popular revolution, forged out of the chaos of putatively sectarian and “tribal” politics in the Muslim parts of the country.

The fragmentary nature of “Eritrea” itself as an idea, or set of ideas, is clear enough. This was a place of marked internal complexity and diversity. Debate over the nature of Eritrea and its external linkages – whether it was part of Ethiopia, and if it had a distinct character, the definition of that character – was intense throughout this period.⁷⁴ In many ways this was much closer to the complex reality of Eritrea than the unitary state which the EPLF later sought to impose. Yet all of this took place against a backdrop of escalating *shifita* violence: *shifita* (“bandits”) represented a long-established practice across Eritrea and the Ethiopian Highlands more generally of withdrawal to the “bush” and armed resistance to the prevailing political and economic order. In the nineteenth century and earlier it had noble connotations, but by the mid-twentieth century the term was being applied much more broadly, and had come to encompass the discontented, the dispossessed and marginalized, and the downright criminal. In the 1940s and 1950s, this was violence which eventually came to overshadow the valid and important debates about Eritrea, and in the 1960s it was co-opted by the liberation movement which sought to transform it into revolutionary energy underpinned by modern political agendas. It was violence, meanwhile, which was mirrored – and in many ways spurred – by that exercised by the Ethiopian state itself, which likewise escalated from the late 1950s onward. The political arena, in short, became a violent space indeed, effectively crushing open debate for the next half century.

Moreover, economic decline has long been a driver of violence and political crisis. Arguably it was rapid economic collapse which drove the Tigrinya into the arms of the armed liberation movement toward the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s. The labor movement was central to highland protest in the 1950s, culminating in the 1958 general strike, bloodily suppressed by the Ethiopian authorities. In the course of the decade, workers had seen unemployment grow rapidly, the central highland industrial hub – the legacy of Italian colonialism – deteriorate in favor of the Shoan highlands around Addis Ababa, and workers’ rights progressively stripped away. Ironically, an expansion in secondary-school education in the same period saw the rise of student radicalism, and fed Christian recruitment into the ELF in the second half of the 1960s, once the socio-economic (as well as the political) realities of Ethiopian rule became clear. Those recruits – some of whom went on to found, and lead,

⁷⁴ Ellingson, “The Emergence;” Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism 1941–1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Bereketeab, *Eritrea*.

the EPLF – were predominantly from a budding intelligentsia, the student movement, and the urban working class, chiefly in Asmara.⁷⁵ Ultimately, the faith that many Eritreans – highland Tigrinya included – placed in the federation with Ethiopia proved unjustified, and deleterious economic conditions drove the Tigrinya, long divided over the meaning of Eritrea and the nature of the relationship with Ethiopia, into the armed struggle in the course of the 1960s.

In some ways, we might pithily summarize this as Muslims starting the liberation struggle and Christians finishing it; for some, indeed, it is a relatively straightforward process by which the Eritrean national struggle is initiated largely by lowland Muslims, who are then shoved aside by more recently galvanized Christian highlanders who proceed to “hijack” the struggle for their own ends.⁷⁶ Yet this was not so much a shift from Muslims to Christians, although there are elements of this, but one from the pastoral peripheries – beginning with the “serf” struggle in the 1940s, with its elements of social and religious reformism, and with its strong links to Sudan – to the central plateau, where the Tigrinya refashioned and “re-centred” the national movement in much the same way that they had attempted to craft an autonomous centre during the period of Ethiopian federation. And in many ways, too, this can be understood in generational terms: this “refashioning” was carried out by angry highland youth born in the 1940s, becoming active as students in the later 1950s, and coming of age in the 1960s, a process of maturation during which they were confronted with their parents’ perceived failings: the failure to defend federal autonomy, to provide economic rights and security, and ultimately to build an effective and cohesive armed movement. The 1950s and 1960s is also the period when Eritrea becomes a diasporic nation, taking on political and economic form abroad. In many ways Eritrea came to be sustained practically and emotionally through the labor and the imaginations of those Eritreans who increasingly sought security outside their troubled homeland.

This is a period, then, in which the issues remain highly pertinent, and to which access exists. The role of Islam and the alienation, and politicization, of the Muslim population; violence, both at state-level and beyond, and the attempt to silence the debate about the multiplicity of Eritrea; the

⁷⁵ Tom Killion, “Eritrean Workers’ Organisation and Early Nationalist Mobilisation, 1948–58,” *Eritrean Studies Review* 2–1 (1997), 1–58; Wolde-Yesus Ammar, “The Role of Asmara Students in the Eritrean Nationalist Movement, 1958–68,” *Eritrean Studies Review* 2–1 (1997), 59–84. See also the exhaustive and remarkably durable John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁷⁶ See for example the rather hostile account – hostile, that is, to the EPLF – in: Tekeste Negash, *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience* (Uppsala: The Nordic Africa Institute, 1997).

traumatization and radicalization which results from prolonged economic distress; generational rupture; the role of the expanding diaspora in sustaining, and interpreting, Eritrea: these issues defined the 1940–1970 period, and they are defining Eritrea now, or will do so in the very near future. They are certainly dynamics which will shape Eritrea for many years to come, and for that reason alone they require careful scholarly scrutiny. Yet of course they also go some way to explaining the EPLF's antipathy toward the past, and certainly toward histories which do not fit with its unitary vision for the nation, and historians whose work will not (and should not) reinforce that vision. Here we may recall the great truth articulated by Eric Hobsbawm: “[T]he history that nationalists want is not the history that professional academic historians, even ideologically committed ones, ought to supply.”⁷⁷ Again, open historical debate – especially around highly sensitive and contested issues – is democratizing, and is symptomatic of the freedom which undergirds plurality. For that reason, the Eritrean government fears it; for that reason, it needs to flourish. Moreover, these are issues which are of direct relevance to those who seek to engage with Eritrea at the level of policy and specifically human rights, and who therefore can only benefit from a greater awareness of the historical dynamics at work during this critical period.

The successful management of these dynamics will depend upon a mindfulness of, but not slavish dependence upon, a deeper history of violence, of plurality, of political contest, and ultimately of political failure, on the part of both Eritreans and Ethiopians whose histories are entangled in the profoundest of ways. This period can be seen to have laid the foundations for what Eritrea has become: a problematic pivot of a state, governed by a regime with a peculiarly strident vision of what Eritrea “is,” imposed by a militarily successful organization which has been, since its inception on the edge of the escarpment in the early 1970s, profoundly suspicious of plurality, dissent, most forms of alterity, and of course Ethiopia. Thus an examination of the 1940–1970 period is not simply a question of historical interest. If it can be assumed – as seems safe at the time of writing – that the current regime will not be in place for very much longer, it is also not an unreasonable assumption that what will unfold in its wake will be something very similar to that which preceded it.

Conclusions – Pasts and Futures

Eritrea's future is frightening, in some ways more so than before, when enemies were somehow easier to discern. But Eritreans are a tougher, more experienced people now, and they know that history holds some lessons. It has never been more important to be historically conscious, able to see

⁷⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, “Ethnicity and Nationalism in Europe Today,” *Anthropology Today* 8–1 (1992), 3–8, 3.

past the immediacy of the incumbent regime, and into a richer, more substantial – and, of course, more complex – past world of political experiments and lessons; nor should Eritreans be afraid to examine that world closely and above all critically, because this is not about romantic pasts and lost glories. It is about wells of human experience. This business can be – to policy- and money-makers – infuriatingly intangible, abstract, and apparently meaningless. But, of course, it isn't. The society without it, and without the capacity to critically reflect – especially in times of conflict, when historical debate must be both robust and moderate – is in trouble indeed, from both within and without. Nations (and citizens) detached from their histories are so much easier to abuse, as African peoples the length and breadth of the continent know only too well over the last century.

The issue here is what I have described elsewhere as the hegemony of modernity.⁷⁸ Those who were too ready to see “history” as an oft-times inconvenient and troubled process which was now “over” with the collapse of the Soviet bloc may have been proven wrong;⁷⁹ but the marginalization of the past, and the tendency among politicians to see history as something faintly ridiculous which too often got in the way of modernity's inexorable march, have been the subject of gloomy assessment elsewhere.⁸⁰ Meanwhile postmodernism in African studies has inhibited research on aspects of Africa's past, and on the lines of continuity, as well as the ruptures, between past and present. But our concern here is not so much postmodernism as presentism: in sum, too many of us have been, in the words of the sinologist Maurice Freedman, “blinded by the dazzling brilliance of the present,”⁸¹ and it is this which needs address. In the case of Eritrea, the fixation with the EPLF and the very contemporary has effectively sidelined any serious and sustained interest in what came before the current regime, never mind anything even earlier. Meanwhile the Eritrean government itself has demonstrated profound hostility to basic independent research or debate of any kind – reflected in its militarized approach to higher education in the country – but particularly, for our purposes, to unfettered reflection on Eritrea's complex past. This deleterious foreshortening of history, underpinned as it is by the reification of nationalist dogma, has compounded the intrinsic presentism of the external engagement with Eritrea.

This is a tale, then, of representation, of inaudibility, of near-invisibility – engendered by both an impatient external audience and a secretive,

⁷⁸ Reid, “Past and Presentism.”

⁷⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992).

⁸⁰ Jonathan C.D. Clark, *Our Shadowed Present: Modernism, Postmodernism and History* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), 5–9.

⁸¹ Quoted in Ioan M. Lewis, “History ‘Functionalised,’” in: Ioan M. Lewis (ed.), *Arguments with Ethnography: Comparative Approaches to History, Politics and Religion* (London/New Brunswick NJ: Continuum, 1999), 1–26, 3.

suspicious, and solipsistic regime. Eritrea's history, it seems, is not as interesting nor as important as Ethiopia's. Even its liberation struggle, in its quiet pomp in the latter part of the 1980s, drew only a fraction of the support offered, for example, to the Palestinian cause by the global Left, and the short horror story that is its history as an independent nation seems to bear out the old maxim that it is better to travel hopefully than to arrive. Eritrea behaves much too badly. Ethiopia, for sure, has received its share of opprobrium from various quarters for its occasional "misdemeanours." But Eritrea has attracted a level of censure and disapproval on an entirely different scale, for which the regime is indisputably responsible. Foreigners may be fickle, cynical, ignorant; but while the Eritrean government makes no attempt to disguise its contempt for them, Ethiopia patronizes, shepherds, *engages* with them. As a result, Ethiopia continues to dominate the historical landscape, and is still seen as more important, more interesting, more *justified*. Eritrea ultimately labors away under the shadow of several generations of scholars who regard Ethiopia as an intellectual cornerstone, just as politicians in the US, and the UK, see Addis Ababa as one of the strategic nodal points in Africa. This was always going to be a challenge for any Eritrean government, so entrenched is the arrangement of power in the Horn; but to a very real extent Eritrea is itself directly responsible for Ethiopia's enduring hegemony, not least because of its annihilation of literary and scholarly culture and its curious solipsism. Eritrea is oddly peripheral, just as it was during the years of African decolonization and, then, liberation struggle; just as it was even in the 1990s, during the brief armistice. In the turbulent, congested and contested space that is the Horn of Africa – the "bad neighborhood" of the title of this piece, in which external actors must pick their local partners using the crudest of criteria – Eritrea is seen as, and to a large extent has made itself, a nuisance and an outcast. Eritrea is not only at the edge of Ethiopia, clinging to the cliff while shouting obscenities to those who purportedly want to "help;" it is actively now a sinister, dark space, and one into which few can venture. It is striking how nicely it has all worked out for those who hated the EPLF in the first place, and who now have been given an ironclad reason, and a post-dated justification, to do so.

It is worth making a final point in this connection, namely that the influence of the humanitarian lobby, and of the think-tank industry, is particularly worrisome considering the mounting pressure, especially in the UK, for academic researchers to engage with a range of "external users" in pursuit of "impact." One unfortunate outcome of this is unquestionably the trend toward the foreshortening of genuine historical research, which is tailored to particular funding bodies and imagined non-academic consumers. This is especially true in the context of Africa, which is seen in overwhelmingly presentist terms. Funders often press for "external engagement" with "stakeholders" leading to "impact," which invariably means engagement with policy-related, humanitarian or developmental agendas.

These are presentist agendas, which actively or otherwise seek a dilution of “the history bit.” Again, this intersects with the Eritrean government’s own mistrust of historical research, giving rise to a striking analytical lacuna in the wider comprehension of Eritrea’s composition and trajectory.

The reopening of Eritrea’s past, and the full disclosure which this must involve, represents a hefty responsibility indeed for historians, but rather more importantly for Eritrea’s next generation of leaders. But it is one they must take seriously if they are to avoid continued invisibility, to bring Eritrea out of the historical gloaming, and above all – in so doing – to achieve the stabilization, demilitarization and the sense of inner ease which is Eritrea’s only chance for survival. Intellectual liberation – beginning with the comprehensive re-examination of the decades preceding the rise of the EPLF – may prove as difficult to achieve as the wide-ranging political reform which Eritrea so desperately needs, but there should no question that the two are ineradicably interwoven. Of course by the time this piece appears in print, something dramatic may have happened: the President’s notoriously poor health may have collapsed completely; the army (or some faction of it) may be in revolt; perhaps Ethiopia will have decided to bring about military resolution, however unlikely that currently seems. Historians who write things “up to the present” routinely run the risk of finding themselves still speaking as everyone dashes from the room to find out what the commotion is outside. But let us hope that, if this is indeed the case, some historical perspectives are developed, and argued over, and that historians are involved. And if it has not happened yet – ditto.

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