

Feature

The Eritrean and Tigrean Ascaris War in Defense of

A Colonial Boundary: Badme

By Tilahun Yilma

The international press, including that of Ethiopia (e.g. *Tobia*, and the *Review*) describes the current conflict at Badme as a war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is no war between Ethiopia and Eritrea; the war is being conducted by two former allies belonging to the same Tigrean ethnic group: the Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF).

After the fall of Mengistu's regime and with diplomatic and logistic support by Western Powers, the TPLF/EPLF leadership was ushered in to power in Ethiopia. It immediately reconstituted itself as a colonial power, and began a campaign of destructive ethnic politics that aroused angry resistance in the Ethiopian people. The pressure of this resistance and quarrels over the spoils of war has now led these former allies into the current conflict.

In this article, I will describe the root causes of the hostilities between the Tigrigna-speaking peoples of northern Ethiopia. This war is one more legacy of the colonization of Ethiopia's northern territory of Mereb Millash, renamed Eritrea by Italians in the late 19th century, who converted the Eritreans into colonial soldiers (*ascaris*) for Italy. The Italian occupation led to a three-pronged assault upon Ethiopian society that has left the country the most impoverished, war-ravaged nation in the world.

Rinderpest

The first and perhaps most grievous assault, which many Ethiopians of the time believed, was the deliberate introduction of rinderpest, the most devastating viral disease of cattle, to facilitate the colonization of a starving and exhausted populace. Just prior to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1888, a devastating epizootic of rinderpest was ignited by the introduction of three infected Indian cattle through the Ethiopian port of Massawa. Rinderpest quickly engulfed the herds of Ethiopia, killing over 90 percent of the cattle and causing great mortality also in wild ruminant populations of buffalo, hartebeest, and antelope. As a consequence, an estimated 30-60 percent of the population of Ethiopia starved to death (Pankhurst, R., "The Great Ethiopian Famine of 1888-1892: A New Assessment." *The Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, (1966) Part I, pp. 95-124; and Part II, 271-294).

The story of the devastation of rinderpest is commemorated on the Ethiopian calendar as *ye-yekkatit ilkit* (the Annihilation of [the month of] Yekkatit). Shortly thereafter the disease spread like wildfire to the entire continent of Africa, killing hundreds of millions of cattle and wild ruminants. Rinderpest still remains the number one cattle disease in Africa.

It is at this juncture that Italy advanced from Massawa to conquer Ethiopia. But Emperor Menelik rallied his starving nation to confront the Italians at the Battle of Adwa; amazingly, he was able to defeat this European colonial power despite its modern military machine. More miraculously, he did it while his people were struggling to survive the famine caused by rinderpest. In addition to other political difficulties, rinderpest also sapped the energy of Menelik's army, and he was prevented from crossing the Mereb River to dislodge the Italians from all territories of Ethiopia. Thus, Mereb Millash remained occupied by the Italians. They renamed it "Eritrea" on January 1, 1890, thereby creating for Ethiopia an enduring cancer that would eat away at the nation. According to Donald L. Levine, the key to Menelik's success was the strength of an army derived from multiethnic cooperation; it becomes obvious why the TPLF/EPLF has unleashed a divisive ethnic war in Ethiopia as soon as it grabbed power.

The Legitimization of a Colonial Boundary: Badme

The second assault on the nation of Ethiopia was the fabrication of meaningless colonial boundaries, leading to separation of peoples that had been historically homogenous by culture, ethnicity, and religion. The divisions created by this action have fueled an intractable state of civil war, dragging Ethiopia into perpetual poverty and utterly destroying its ancient cultural heritage. For 30 years, the Eritreans, supported and financed by foreign powers, waged a war of “independence” to liberate themselves from their own rich heritage and fertile land. They ruled as a colonial power when they gained ascendancy in Ethiopia. And today they cry “foul” and complain of “ethnic cleansing” as they are deported from Ethiopia back to Eritrea.

Today, the TPLF is sacrificing the lives of thousands of non-Tigrigna speaking Ethiopians and draining meager national resources in defense of the colonial boundary of a piece of God-forsaken, rocky desert called Badme, Zalambessa, Bada, etc. Most distressing, Ethiopia’s glorious victory at the Battle of Adwa has been smudged, and its citizens have been relegated to the lowest form of life; they have now become *ascaris* for the TPLF defending Italy’s colonial boundary at Badme. These non-Tigrigna-speaking Ethiopians are forced to fight on the front lines, absorbing the brunt of attack and the highest war casualties, thus serving as cannon fodder "for the stupidest of Africa's stupid wars" (*Africa Today*, April 1999). Meanwhile, the Ethiopian soldiers are segregated into ethnic groups to ensure there is no unified Ethiopian army that might threaten the TPLF grip of power.

After Badme was recaptured from the Eritreans, the TPLF grabbed the entire credit and celebrated by hoisting its flag to the disgust of tens of thousands of non-Tigrigna-speaking Ethiopians who actually made the real sacrifice. Thus, this event clearly demonstrates that the TPLF has not abated an inch in its contempt and enmity toward Ethiopians. Later, the Ethiopians demanded the replacement of the TPLF flag with the Ethiopian flag.

If in fact Badme, Zalambessa, and Bada were that significant, why have millions of malnourished Eritreans and Tigreans (including my grandfather, Wolde-Ab Felema) historically abandoned this inhospitable place to flock barefoot and in rags to better their lives in the rest of Ethiopia? According to *Africa Today* (April 1999): "observers likened the conflict to two bold men fighting over a comb. What economic or strategic benefit could be gained from the control of the 400-square-kilometere rocky triangle of land that these two former allies are now locked in battle over? Eritrea already has enough rocks, says one analyst, adding that if rocks were worth money Eritrea would be the richest country in the world."

The TPLF served as the right arm of the EPLF in conquering and dismembering Ethiopia, and subjugated millions of non-Tigrigna-speaking Ethiopians in Mereb Millash. Having played a major role in Eritrea’s war of secession from Ethiopia and its appropriation of Ethiopia’s Red Sea coastline (including its two ports), the TPLF is now sacrificing the lives of tens of thousands of non-Tigrigna-speaking Ethiopians and pouring millions of dollars into legitimizing a colonial boundary in the name of “defense of Ethiopian territorial integrity."

A Hostage Mentality

The third assault by Italian colonial powers was upon the psychology of the countless Tigrigna-speaking people of Mereb Millash, the “mind-rape” that led to their self-rejection. Their identification with their masters, the so-called hostage mentality, is a pervasive mental condition often observed in people who have been subjected to long-term capture, slavery and/or colonial rule. Acceptance and glorification of the foreign culture of Italy caused the Eritreans to deny and degrade their own birthright and that of their neighbors. The EPLF and TPLF, composed of these psychologically affected people and aided by the West, undertook the colonization of Ethiopia and the systematic destruction of Ethiopia’s ancient culture, language, and literature. If they succeed, the permanent scars of a colonial mentality will be impressed upon the virgin minds of future generations of Ethiopians.

The TPLF/EPLF continue to be a cancer eating at the vital parts of Ethiopia, with no relief in sight. Ethiopians must ask themselves what benefits, if any, they have received from their association with the EPLF/TPLF and the Tigrigna-speaking people of Tigray and Mereb Millash who support these two vicious groups. The record shows only war, famine, poverty, greed, racism, and misery brought by the millions of ungrateful “immigrants” from the north who have dominated Ethiopia’s economy. According to the World Bank, Ethiopia is the poorest nation in the world today; the *Economist* (September 6, 1997) ranks it number one on the misery scale and fifth in the ratio of expenditures on bullets versus books (July 4, 1994).

The TPLF has dismantled the Ethiopian education system, imprisoned and killed Ethiopian leaders, forced the educated to flee their country as refugees, and pillaged resources for the building of Tigray. Starving families have been forced to offer their children in exchange for food money; and ancient Ethiopia, which once drew foreign tourists with its rich historical heritage, has now become a popular destination for those seeking child prostitutes and hunters of souvenirs of ancient and historical artifacts. In short, the TPLF has launched a devastating war against the future of Ethiopia, its children.

In collaboration with the EPLF, the TPLF has been involved in the massacre of the proud Afar Ethiopians who occupy the region stretching from Djibouti in the south all the way to Massawa in the north. Their crime was an unwavering determination to defend their Ethiopian heritage and territorial integrity. While thousands of non-Tigrigna-speaking Ethiopians have fought and died for Badme’s colonial boundary, few, if any, have come to assist the Afars in their lone struggle to secure a real Ethiopian boundary: the coastlines of the Red Sea.

On March 9th, one million Ethiopians marched in the streets of Addis Ababa to celebrate the defeat of the Italians by Menelik at the Battle of Adwa and the Eritreans at Badme; astonishingly, there was not a single representation at these ceremonies from the Meles regime. When the TPLF entered Addis Ababa in 1991, Meles discarded the Ethiopian flag as a “piece of rag,” and denounced Menelik as an Amhara colonialist who committed such atrocities as amputating the breasts of the women of Oromo and subjugating other ethnic minorities.

Ascaris to the core, Isayas and Meles and the EPLF/TPLF organization orchestrated a barrage of propaganda to discredit Menelik’s historical achievement at the Battle of Adwa, which had become a mantra for all freedom-loving people of Africa: for the first time an African nation had humiliated a European colonial power. Now, however, the TPLF is waging war against its former ally; they wrap themselves in the Ethiopian flag, and resurrect Menelik as a great Ethiopian hero.

Ethiopians should not denigrate the memories of Menelik and the heroes of Adwa; let only the Tigrean and Eritrean *ascaris* annihilate each other at Badme in honor of their colonial master, Italy. Ethiopians should treasure this moment. It is an opportunity for respite and relief for the Ethiopian people, a chance to gather strength to fight the cancer that has been eating away at our nation.

Ethiopians should never support the TPLF in Badme’s colonial boundary conflict. It is an insult to our heritage and to our glorious legacy and to Ethiopia’s great victory over a European colonial power at the Battle of Adwa. There is a worthier goal -- let us liberate ourselves and the entire non-Tigrigna-speaking population of Mereb Millash, who are enslaved against their will by those that worship their former colonial masters. Let the Tigreans and the Eritreans annihilate each other in their own *killil* or tribal homelands, where Badme-Zalambessa belongs.

The Real Cause of the Conflict between the TPLF and EPLF

The real cause of the conflict between the TPLF and EPLF is best documented in Dr. Assefa Negash’s booklet, *The Pillage of Ethiopia by Eritreans and their Tigrean Surrogates*, 1966. Simply put, the old Ethiopian proverb has come to pass: “*Hoodlums band when pillaging but feud when parceling the loot.*” Isayas organized and

assisted in the establishment of the TPLF to achieve his long-term goal, the desolation of Ethiopia as a nation and the pillage of its natural resources to build Eritrea to be the greatest industrial and military power in Africa.

The TPLF was to be used as a surrogate in implementing Isayas's destructive agenda in Ethiopia. Meles, the designated Prime Minister of Ethiopia, has an Eritrean mother who voted in support of the Eritrean referendum for secession. This is probably the first time in history that a "Prime Minister" of a country and his mother supposedly belong to two different, warring nationalities. The master plan, to destroy Ethiopia as an independent nation, was published in 1989 -- two years before the TPLF marched into Addis Ababa -- in a book in Amharic, *Tallaqu Sera (The Great Conspiracy)* by Abraham Yayyeh, and a former member of the TPLF.

The two Eritreans, Isayas and Meles, followed a colonial master's blueprint -- to divide and rule Ethiopia by waging ethnic politics, plundering its resources to build Tigray and Eritrea as "industrial giants" of Africa. Isayas bragged that Eritrea in Africa would become as Israel is to the Middle East and Singapore is to Asia, and there will not be such a thing called Ethiopia in a decade.

Initially, it appeared that Eritrea would have its cake (independence of Eritrea and the destruction of Ethiopia) and continue to eat it by pillaging the resources of Ethiopia through its surrogate puppets, Meles and the TPLF, and the thousands of Eritreans in Ethiopia who control commerce and industry. Special privileges were instituted for them to ensure this continued stranglehold. This included appropriating Ethiopia's major export agricultural products such as coffee to generate hard currency for Eritrea on the world market, and regulating use of Ethiopian currency for Eritrea's benefit. Eritrea for a period of time became one of the 14 top coffee-exporting countries in the world, although not a single coffee tree grows in that rocky desert and forbidding land. Isayas also made arrangements with the TPLF regime for Ethiopia to pay duties in hard currency for use of the port of Asab, although the inhabitants of the region, including that of Massawa, happen to be Afars, one of the most proud Ethiopian citizens.

In the meantime, the TPLF started borrowing billions of dollars **annually** from the World Bank and receiving aid from international donors in the name of Ethiopia for exclusive use in industrializing Tigray. Then a rift developed between the TPLF and EPLF, as these two hoodlums fell out over the division of the loot. A sudden massive expansion of development in Tigray precipitated intense jealousy in Eritrea and led to the current conflict at Badme.

In the meantime, the struggle of nationalist Ethiopians against oppression by the TPLF/EPLF gathered steam. By publications in books (e.g. *The Pillage of Ethiopia by Eritreans and their Tigrean Surrogates*, by Dr. Assefa Negash), the print media (*Newsweek*, *New York Times*, *Tobia*, *Ethiopian Register*, *Ethiopian Review*, etc.), and radio broadcasts to Ethiopia from Europe, they succeeded in bringing the attention of the Ethiopian people and the international community to the TPLF and EPLF malignant cancer that was eating away at the nation. In particular, I sent messages in radio broadcasts and print articles concentrating on one issue: *Tigreans and Eritreans should be the primary beneficiaries of their own laws of tribal homelands (killil), and Ethiopians should use every means available to enforce their deportation back to their own regions.* Tigreans and Eritreans were especially distressed by the publication of my article calling for restoration of Ethiopia's old boundaries, including its Red Sea coastline, with closed borders around their tribal homelands called Greater Eritrea (See my article: "A New Map for Ethiopia", *Ethiopian Review*, January-February 1997 and *Tobia*, *Meggabit* 1989 E. C.).

These activities galvanized Ethiopian nationalism, and set off alarm bells among the Tigrean and Eritrean residents of Ethiopia. The Tigreans realized that without Ethiopia's resources, Badme could not be a Garden of Eden that could feed their people. The articles also exposed the inequity of Eritrea's special privileges in Ethiopia, and tweaked the ego of Isayas for using his enemy's currency (Ethiopian *Birr*) for a country boasting to become the greatest industrial and military power in Africa. He responded by printing his own currency, the worthless *Naqfa*, assuming that he could exchange it on an equal basis with the Ethiopian *Birr*. When this did not work, his people began to starve. The rift between the two regimes widened when the TPLF refused to pay hard currency for the use of the Asab Port, and switched to using the Port of Djibouti.

Then the prediction of Dr. Mulay, the personal physician of Meles, that Eritrea will become bankrupt, came true. As was documented in my previous articles in the *Ethiopian Review* and *Tobia*, I asked Mulay why Ethiopia was not using the free port of Djibouti instead of paying to use Asab. His answer was, “we would never allow that since it would bankrupt Eritrea.”

Indeed, Eritrea was bankrupt, and Isayas invaded Badme in an effort to shift the attention of his starving people from their very real economic problems. He also hoped that he might intimidate the TPLF into giving way, allowing Eritrea to continue plundering Ethiopia. I recall a discussion I had with a Sudanese Diplomat in Italy in 1997 about the pillaging of Ethiopia by Eritrea after they “liberated” themselves. He responded: “Eritrea is a barren desert; where do you expect Isayas to get food for his people? Now Isayas’s worst nightmare has come true; Eritrea has become truly independent.”

The Deportation of Eritreans by the TPLF

I kindly request the *Ethiopian Register* to publish the seven pages of court documents that the TPLF presented to justify jailing the four editors of *Tobia* for publishing my articles advocating the deportation of Tigreans and Eritreans to their *Killil*. Tigreans and Eritreans drafted and implemented the so-called “New Ethiopian Constitution” that advocated tribal homelands (*killil*) and ethnic politics. Now that Tigreans find Eritreans a threat, they have had no qualms about implementing my recommendations, and thousands of Eritreans have been deported back to Eritrea. It is important that Ethiopians commit this suggestion to memory: the job will not be complete until we also deport Tigreans who advocate *killil* policy back to their *Killil* and make them taste their own medicine. The TPLF has now set the precedent by deporting Eritreans; they are no longer in a position to reject the deportation of Tigreans who swear in the *killil* system. For Ethiopians, there is no difference between these two poisonous snakes (TPLF and EPLF). One is definitely preferable to two, but each is deadly to Ethiopia.

In our worst nightmares, we never expected Tigreans to collaborate with Eritreans in waging ethnic politics and implementing an apartheid policy of dividing the country into tribal homelands (*killil*), wiping out a three thousand-year-old nation.

In the past Tigreans and Eritreans have accused me of using derogatory language to describe their rogue behavior toward Ethiopians. In public, Meles has protested that I have called Tigreans and Eritreans the cancer of Ethiopia. Now, I hear them freely hurling the same language toward each other. “In justifying the need for deporting Eritreans, Meles drew an analogy between the expulsion of Eritreans and the amputation of a limb suffering from gangrene.” (*Ethiopian Register*, March 1999, page 11). Meles has a point; there is no match to the stench of gangrene. The Eritreans are even describing their deportation back to Eritrea as “ethnic cleansing,” an absurd concept since both belong to the same Tigrean ethnic group. I guess they just don’t like being victims of their own treachery.

Eritreans would like Ethiopians to forget that in 1991 the EPLF callously expelled 200,000 non-Tigrigna-speaking Ethiopians (mainly women and children) from Eritrea. Upon their arrival in Addis Ababa -- empty-handed, their homes and property having been confiscated -- they were met with a demand by Netsannet Asfaw (Mele’s spokeswoman) that they be banished to their *killil* and their refugee camps removed from her sight. There was no sense of responsibility or compassion for these displaced persons; *The New York Times* (November 3, 1993) called them the “Unforgiven Ethiopians.”

A Biological Analysis of the Conflict

The body is protected against invading germs by producing chemicals (antibodies) and killer cells called T-cells. Their attack is selectively directed against foreign invaders (germs): they have been “educated” not to attack

the host's body. They do not normally protect us from cancer, since it cannot be distinguished from our own body. That is why cancer is defined as "the enemy within," and that is also the reason why I defined the TPLF/EPLF and their supporters who are waging ethnic politics in our country as the cancer, the enemy within Ethiopia.

Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) is a condition in which our defense system fails to distinguish "foreign" from "self," and starts destroying our own body as if it were a foreign invader. In short, our defense mechanisms attack our own body and eventually destroy our organs, ultimately leading to death. I would like to use the metaphor of SLE to describe the mental condition that afflicts people subjugated under colonialism or slavery. They reject their own cultural or historical heritage and adapt that of their tormentors.

A review of the educational policy of Italians in Eritrea by Dr. Adane Taye (former dean of Asmara University) may make my point. In his book, *A Historical Survey of State of Education in Eritrea*, Asmara, 1991, Dr. Adane reveals clearly the slave mentality of Eritreans towards their former colonial master, Italy, that made "Eritrea an educational desert . . . In addition, the color bar was enforced; Eritreans were segregated from whites in schools, areas of residence, dining and sleeping houses. Even in regard to items such as clothing and footwear the natives were limited to locally made products. They were not allowed to purchase western types of suits and shoes." Dr. Adane goes on to state that, "despite the discrimination, segregation, oppression and exploitation practiced against them for fifty years, in general, most of the Eritreans appear to have no deep rooted hatred or discontent towards the Italians." On the contrary, we are witnessing today that many Eritreans admire, glorify, and even revere Italians, emulating the Italian way of life in mannerisms, food, and language while nursing hatred and disdain for Ethiopians.

No wonder Isayas and Meles are now waging war over Badme, a colonial boundary line fabricated by their colonial masters, while rejecting their own true heritage. This phenomenon is not limited to Eritreans. One sees the same effect on many other nations as a long-term result of colonialism.

Already, the disease of self-rejection is growing in once-proud Ethiopia. Now that the Tigrean *ascaris* are in charge, Ethiopian culture is out and western culture is in. The West is providing extensive financial assistance for the destruction of the Ethiopian national language and alphabet. The TPLF/EPLF were assisted by the British in the drafting of the so called New Ethiopian Constitution of tribal homeland (*killi*) and ethnic politics; a British diplomat has been quoted as saying, "unless the three thousand-year old Ethiopian nationalism is destroyed, the West will be unable to exploit the country."

Definitely, the US has taken heed of that advice and poured in millions of dollars for a program designated as Basic Education Systems Overall (BESO). This program requires abandonment of our national language (Amharic) and our alphabet in schooling, and the substitution of the Latin alphabet and more than 80 tribal languages to teach non-Tigrigna-speaking Ethiopian children. Ethiopia is the only country in sub-Saharan Africa with its own literature in its own language and alphabet, but Ethiopia could not be encouraged to excel, develop, and set a positive example that could be emulated by the rest of Africa. No, instead it had to be destroyed!

The following is a short passage from a report to the Ministry of Education by Dr. Richard J. Kraft, one of the US officials implementing the BESO program in Ethiopia. "Newly Written Languages: To my knowledge, no country in the world is facing this particular curricular challenge. To not only produce new, up-to-date, quality instructional materials is a staggering challenge, but to produce them in newly written Latinized script, which the writers and teachers have only just learned themselves, is something unique in the world. There appears...to be a lack of agreement on spelling, poor quality control on proofreading, no standard dictionaries in many of the languages, little thought about how well these "newly" written languages will be able to handle more advanced conceptual ideas in the curriculum...While it is not my role or that of any foreigner to make political judgments about language policy, it is important to state that literacy is THE basic skill, and unless means can be found to assure genuine literacy in each language, the current curricular experiment could have disastrous consequences."

Indeed, while Ethiopians have rallied to support Tigreans to defend Badme, a colonial boundary, no one has come forward to protect Ethiopia's future, its children, from systematic annihilation of their educational system by the enemy. Today tens of millions of Ethiopian children are suffering under the confusion of the new system. In contrast, the TPLF has just completed the building of 160 elementary and high schools equipped with modern

computers and facilities in Tigray province that can accommodate over 160,000 pupils (*Tobia, Miazia* 4, 1991 E. C.).

I highly recommend an article by Susan J. Hoben entitled, “The Language of Education in Ethiopia, Empowerment or Imposition?” abridged in the November 1996, issue of the *Ethiopian Review*. It is also interesting to note that while Americans are considering the disadvantages of bilingual education for their own citizens, sometimes eliminating it through legislation, they are pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into teaching Ethiopian children in over 80 distinct languages and Latinized alphabets. In short, Ethiopia has become a colony, and its children are being forced to reject their great cultural heritage, literature, and a rich national language in favor of enforced “westernization” by Tigreans and Eritreans. The end result will be no education at all, and a population eternally impoverished by their ignorance.

Concerned Ethiopians have worried that it might take a while to recover from the brutal years of Mengistu's dictatorship and begin to deal with our present archenemies, the TPLF and EPLF. Fortunately, the falling out of these two thieves has given Ethiopians belonging to more than 80 ethnic groups a most unexpected gift; they are annihilating each other while fighting over Ethiopia's resources and defending their colonial master's boundary at Badme. And when thieves fall out, just “Ethiopians” will have their due. I hope that this opportunity for unity will not be missed, and that we will join together to overcome our enemies and bring relief to Ethiopia.

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