ERITREA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

By

S. F. NADEL

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The section on Eritrea and Ethiopia - Present Relations describes the political situation as it existed at the time of writing. The more recent political developments, though foreshadowed in the present account, have been ignored.

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ERITREA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

I. THE TERRITORY OF ERITREA

1. Geography and Political Division

Eritrea is a country without physical frontiers. Its political frontiers are largely lines drawn on the map. They have never stemmed, only encouraged, migrations, the spreading of cultural influences, or political encroachment. This is true even of the Red Sea coast, natural boundary though it is. The only physical barrier of Eritrea lies within the territory. It is represented in the mountain spur, physically an extension of the Abyssinian tableland, which runs from south to north, sloping down from the central plateau of Eritrea to the north and the sea. Today, this spur divides the ethnic groups in the east and west of the country and, like a divide, bounds their nomadic migrations. But in the past, only a hundred years ago, even this physical barrier was a bridge rather than a divide, and allowed numerous migrations across its passes and valleys.

The mountain spur divides the triangle which is Eritrea into two parts: into the narrow coastal plain in the east, and the wide arid plain in the west. The mountain spur itself is a third geographical zone, which we will call the "Northern Hills". A fourth zone is represented in the plateau in the south and centre of Eritrea - the "Central Plateau".

The administrative organization of the Colony follows this geographical division fairly closely. The Western Plain corresponds to the administrative Division - or *Commissariato*, in Italian nomenclature - of Agordat. The Eastern Plain is largely identical with the territories of the two Divisions Massawa and Assab. The Northern Hills form the Division of Keren. And the Central Plateau is divided between the three Divisions Hamasien, Serae, and Akkele-Guzai.

Each of these four geographical zones is an ethnic zone as well. In the Western Plain we meet with the large nomadic tribe of the Beni Amer: a tribe, Hamitic by race, Mohammedan by religion, and speaking Beja and Tigré. Two other important tribes in this area (omitting certain small and insignificant groups) are the Baria and Kunama. They are semi-pagan, though partly islamized, of Negro stock, and speak languages of their own, which bear no affinity to other languages in Eritrea.

The Northern Hills are the habitat of numerous tribes, of greatly varying size, sedentary and agriculturalist in the south, nomadic and pastoral in the north. In the south, we meet with a block of tribes speaking a language called Belein, not otherwise represented in Eritrea. In the north the predominant language is Tigré. Nearly all the tribes in the Northern Hills have adopted Islam, though some became Mohammedans only in the last hundred years, having abandoned their former faith, Coptic Christianity.

The Eastern Plain is, again, inhabited by numerous groups, mostly small tribes or fragments of tribes. All are Mohammedan. Their main

languages are Tigré in the north of the plain, and Saho and Dankali in the south.

/The east, north and west thus show a certain cultural and ethnic uniformiy. The people are organized in tribes, they are Mohammedan by religion, and nomadic or semi-nomadic in their livelihood. The ethnic "bridge" of the Northern Hills, moreover, has caused the appearance of groups sharing a common language (Tigré) and claiming common descent, both east and west of the mountain spur.

The Central Plateau, finally, is inhabited by a large, solid racial block. The people are sedentary and agriculturist, and are organized, not in tribes, but in territorial units. They possess a common language (Tigrinya) and a common religion (Coptic Christianity). Many claim common descent, and all share an identical civilization. We will call this racial and cultural block by its prominent trait, language, the "Tigrinya Block".

2. Links with other Territories

Each side of the Eritrean triangle faces a different territory, the home of different races and a different civilization. In the west Eritrea borders on the Sudan; in the south on the Ethiopian Empire; in the east Eritrea faces the Red Sea and south-western Arabia. Many of the ethnic and cultural groups that exist in Eritrea have their affinities with groups without, across one or the other of the three frontiers. These affinities vary in nature and weight: they are embodied in racial, linguistic or religious kinship, in present-day contacts, or in past political unity. None has helped to shape the political frontiers of the country.

The Italian colony of Eritrea came into being in 1890, and took final shape, after various vicissitudes of war, conquest and defeat, in 1900. It ceased to exist again as a separate dominion in 1935, when it became part of the new Italian Empire of East Africa. If, then, the Eritrea of the years before 1935 (which is the Eritrea of to-day) was no more than an artificial creation, owing its existence to the accident of colonial conquest the question arises whether to perpetuate or correct this "accident" when, at some future date, the political existence of the country might be re-examined. To "correct" the frontiers of Eritrea, if corrected they shall be, must mean to harmonize them with the affinities or divergences which link Eritrea with, or separate her from, the neightbouring territories. It is the purpose of the following description to examine these affinities and divergences.

This examination will follow the threefold orientation of the country — towards the Sudan, towards Ethiopia, and towards the cultural area embracing the Red Sea and south-western Arabia. In each case the relations between Eritrea and her neighbours will be discussed under four headings: (1) communications and economics; (2) ethnic and cultural links; (3) historical links; and (4) present relations.

II. ERITREA AND THE SUDAN

1. Communications and Economics

The western frontier of Eritrea is drawn across a wide open plain which is crossed by two motor roads, at Sabdarat and Tessenei, and innumerable camel tracks. In the extreme north, the frontier skirts the edge of the Northern Hills. Here, too, there are many tracks and caravan routes, and one motor road, which crosses the frontier at Karora. In the west, the nomadic tribes on both sides of the border are wont to pass across it on their seasonal migrations in search of grazing. The Beni Amer of Eritrea do not move deeply into the Sudan; the Sudanese section of the tribe, on the other hand, regards the Western Plain of Eritrea, up to the foothills, as its traditional pasture land. In the Northern Hills, the Eritrean tribes cross only occasionally into the Sudan, to the region of Tokar, when a bad year forces them to look for grazing grounds farther afield.

This dependence on the grazing grounds in the Sudan affects only a few tribes of Eritrea — the Beni Amer in the west, and the Hababb and Beit Mala in the Northern Hills. Sections of a third tribe in the Northern Hills, the Maria, have been emigrating in the last 10-20 years to Kassala, driven from their country by the scarcity of land. In the economic life of the remaining tribes in the Western Plain or the Northern Hills the proximity of the Sudan plays no part. Rather, as we shall see, the contacts of the northern tribes are with the east and the coast, which is one of the seasonal habitats of the migrant groups.

Yet an economic dependence of a different nature links a much larger portion of Eritrea with the Sudan. The insufficiency of agricultural production in Eritrea forces that country to look for supplies from outside. The Sudan is one of the main sources of supply. They reach Eritrea by motor traffic and railway as well as camel caravans, both in the form of the large-scale imports of merchants, and as the small-scale purchases of migrant families. The main inroads for the former are the markets of Tessenei and Agordat in the west. There are, too, occasional imports from the north, from Tokar to Nacfa; but they occur only in times of emergency, when the crops in Eritrea have failed.

2. Cultural

Here three importants facts link the Sudan with western Eritrea: the common religion of Islam, a closely similar social and economic background, and the bond of ethnic unity.

The unity of Islam, an idea of great political force, has for centuries threatened the integrity of the Ethiopian Empire, of which Eritrea once formed a part. It is still a vital factor in the lives of many Mohammedan tribes in Eritrea, and causes their eyes to turn to the west and the Sudan. This orientation is fostered today by the common spiritual allegiance of the Mohammedan groups on both sides of the border to the holy family of Morghani, whose representatives live in Khartoum, Kassala, and Agordat.

The similarity in social organization and economic habits constitutes a potential rather than an active tie. On both sides of the border we meet with nomadic herdsmen tribes, possessed of a closely similar social

structure. They are organized in tribes, sub-tribes and kinship groups, and they share the paramount characteristic of their social system — a division into ruling class and serf caste. Thus these tribes would easily fit into a common administrative framework with the groups in the eastern Sudan. This is also true of the sedentary and in part pagan tribes in Agordat Division. For these groups, the Baria and Kunama, are closely akin in their cultural make-up and their social organization to certain negro tribes in the Central Sudan and the Nuba Mountains.

This pronounced cultural affinity ends at the escarpment of the Northern Hills. Many of the tribes in the Northern Hills, too, share with the Sudan the religion of Islam, nomadic livelihood, a caste-system, even their language, Tigré. Yet here the cultural affinities do not attain the weight of a potential political bond. For the tribes in the south of the hills, the Belein, Mensa or Beit Juk, are still conscious of their origin in the Ethiopian highlands, and of the diversity of religion which, only hundred years ago, separated them from the Mohammedans in the plain and indeed, to some extent, separates them still. Though not strong enough to foster sentiments of relationship with the Tigrinya race, this consciousness effectively sustains the ethnic independence of these groups. In the northern groups the orientation is towards the east rather than the west. If the language of Tigré spreads to the west, it also embraces the coastal plain in the east. And the religious affinity with the Sudan is more than balanced by the multiform ethnic ties with the groups in the Eastern Plain and by the habits of livelihood, which centre round the seasonal migrations east of the "divide" of the Northern Hills.

3. Ethnic

Only one (though the largest) tribe in the Western Plain is linked with the Sudan by ties stronger than those of cultural similarity or potential unity. We are referring to the Beni Amer, who spread over the plain on both sides of the border. The division of the tribe into an Eritrean and a Sudanese branch was the result of comparatively recent historical events, which we shall discuss presently. The two groups regard themselves still as branches of an identical ethnic unit. Tribal sections and family groups are divided between the two countries. Sudanese and Eritrean Beni Amer intermarry freely and maintain close social contacts. Above all, the two branches, as we shall see, still acknowledge allegiance to the same ruling house.

Another large tribe on the Sudan side, the Hadendowa, regards itself as the "brothers" of the Beni Amer. The Hadendowa are of the same racial extraction, and speak one of the two languages of the Beni Amer, Beja. It must be said that frequent border raids and blood feuds have fostered a traditional hostility between the Beni Amer in Eritrea and the Hadendowa in the Sudan. But these feuds may partly be due to the political separation of the groups, which precluded both closer contacts and a unified administrative control. And partly, too, this hostility is of the nature of tribal feuds, which are no strange thing in nomadic races, even between clans or kinship groups of the same tribe.

There are also certain other nomadic tribes which occur on both sides of the frontier, like the Rashaida and Shukria. They are small

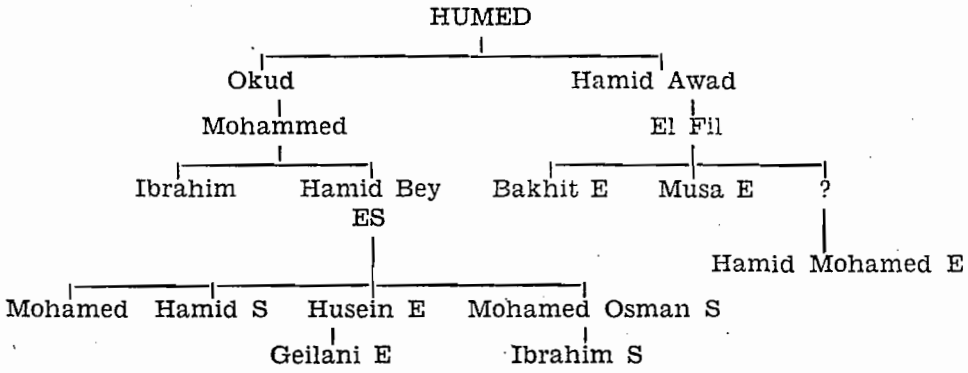
and insignificant, and may be disregarded. We must, however, describe in more detail the ethnic link between the two branches of the Beni Amer tribe.

It was, at one time, a political link as well. Up to the end of the Turkish regime in the Sudan the Beni Amer in the Sudan and Eritrea formed a single nation. They were under a common paramount chief, or "Diglal", the descendant of a long line of hereditary chiefs. The last common ruler of the tribe was Diglal Hamid Bey, who reigned at the time of the Mahdist rebellion. Threatened by the Mahdist armies, the Beni Amer west of the river Gash abandoned their country, not without having suffered heavily at the hands of the invaders, and moved north, to Tokar. The Beni Amer east of the Gash sought the protection of the Ethiopian Empire; they became tributary to it, and the paramount chief who assumed the rule of the split-off section moved to Asmara, then the seat of the Imperial Governor of Eritrea. With the occupation of Massawa by the Italians, in 1885, the separation of the two sections became complete; for the Eritrean Beni Amer readily submitted to the new power in the land. When the Mahdist armies were finally defeated, and the Sudan reoccupied, the Sudanese Beni Amer received a new Diglal, Mohammed Hamid, at the hands of the liberator of the Sudan, Lord Kitchener. The tribe moved back to its old home on the river Gash, now on the border of the young Italian colony of Eritrea.

But in this political separation the old unity of the Beni Amer tribe survived in the form of a common ruling house, acknowledged by both branches. The first Diglal of the Eritrean Beni Amer, Musa, was distantly related to the last Diglal who ruled over the united Beni Amer nation, descending from a different branch of the same family. Musa's successor, Hussein, was again of the family of the old common rulers of the tribe, and a brother of the Sudanese Diglal whom Kitchener appointed. The descendants of these two men are ruling today over the two branches of the tribe (see genealogical table below). And when, at the death of the late Diglal of the Sudanese Beni Amer, the Diglal's office fell vacant, it was found that the lawful successor lived in Eritrea (which fact, to his misfortune, disqualified him in the eyes of the Sudan Government). This is the genealogy of the more important paramount chiefs of the tribe.

E . . . . . Diglal of the Eritrean Beni Amer

S . . . . . Diglal of the Sudanese Beni Amer



4. Historical

The Sudan, or more precisely, Egypt as the overlord of the Sudan, has once in the past exercised a passing control over the west of Eritrea and even, for a short period, over the hills of Keren. This is, in short, the history of Egyptian rule in Eritrea.

Since 1692, when the Ethiopian Emperor Yasu defeated the Fung Kingdom on the western frontier of his dominion, and forced the Beni Amer, Baria, and Kunama into submission, the west and north of Eritrea had been, in name, dependencies of the Ethiopian Empire. But this overlordship was implemented only spasmodically, at the rare times when the Empire was sufficiently strong internally to uphold its claims over the remote frontier regions. The claims were repeatedly contested both by the groups within and without the frontier, and military expeditions against rebels and frontier tribes rather than a stable continuous rule were the expressions of the Abyssinian sovereignty. Behind many of these frontier rebellions lurked the shadow of Islamic expansion, which had once before nearly wrecked the Empire - at the time of the famous Grany, Sultan of Harrar and conqueror of Ethiopia (1527-42). A second, much more recent, threat arose when, in 1834, the Egyptians occupied Kassala, establishing some measure of control over the unruly Beja tribes on the frontier and arrogating to themselves the role of protectors of the tribes in the Western Plain. Ethiopia replied to this threat to her sovereignty with raids and cruel repressions, which drove many of the tribes into the arms of Egypt, and so of Islam. The Egyptians retorted with more raids on Ethiopian territory, up to the highland of Keren, burning the town and decimating the then still Christian Belein tribes (1852-54).

Twenty years later the imperialist ambitions of Egypt found a fitting protagonist in the Swiss adventurer Munziger, who had offered his services to the Egyptians, then the masters of Massawa. His plan was to throw a bridge from east to west, linking the two Egyptian possessions across the Keren Hills. Making use of the internal unrest in Ethiopia, Munziger established a foothold in Keren, both by military threat and clever negotiations with the local tribes. In 1872 the Belein tribes declared their submission to Egypt, which once more assumed the role of a "protector", and in the same year Munziger occupied Keren at the head of an Egyptian battalion. Many Eritrean chiefs, even of the Christian plateau groups, were ready to join forces with the Egyptians, and accepted the high ranks (Ethiopian ranks) offered them by the invaders: such men were Ras Woldenkiel of the Hamasien, Dejach Burru of the Serae, and Bahrnegasse Godefa of Gura in the Akkele-Guzai. Indeed it looked as though the Egyptian invasion would stop only on the Mareb, the future frontier of Italian Eritrea. In 1873 Munziger extended the Egyptian possessions as far as the Setit in the west and Assab in the east. Abyssinia's appeal to the European powers was in vain; Europe, Britain included, left Egypt a free hand. Egypt's pretentions, however, were soon to come to an ignominious end: in 1875 and 1876 her armies were defeated by the Abyssinians under Emperor John. Two battles, the first on the Mareb, the second at Gura, sealed the fate of the Egyptian possessions in Ethiopia. Egypt negotiated for peace, and obtained a treaty which still acknowedged her title over Keren and the country

of the Belein. After a few years, weakened by the Mahdist rebellion, Egypt tacitly abandoned this last territorial claim.

5. Present Relations

The claims of Egypt to the Territories which she held for forty years, and the counter-claims of Ethiopia alike, were based on the sole right of conquest. If Ethiopia's claim was the more ancient, it was also the more unwarranted. Egypt could at least proclaim herself the protector of the faith which she shared with the tribes on the fringes of the Ethiopian dominions. Yet Egypt went for beyond the limits justified by such argument. Munziger, a realist and something of a visionary, added a justification of strikingly modern tone - the necessity of a strategic link between the coastal possessions and the vast dominion of the Sudan. The link led, of necessity, through the Northern Hills of Eritrea and to the natural fortress of Keren.

Today as then, an expansion of the Sudan over the Northern Hills would be justifiable only on the same grounds of strategic or political necessity. For, these are the present relations between the groups in western Eritrea and the Sudan.

To the largest tribe in the plain, the Beni Amer, the frontier means only an arbitrary line, separating the tribe from its brothers and cousins, and, partly, from its traditional grazing grounds. The pagan Baria and Kunama are akin to tribes in the Sudan, though they have no consciousness of that affinity, and entertain no contacts which might call it into consciousness. The tribes in the Northern Hills, finally, are aware of their common faith with the Sudan. They watch, with friendly interest, the kindred, powerful State in the west. One or two tribal sections might emigrate to the richer Sudan. But the rest, strongly conscious of its ethnic separateness and of its different livelihood of migrants between the mountains and the coast, remains aloof.

III. THE RED SEA COAST

1. Communications and Economics

The civilization of Eritrea derives probably from western and southern Arabia. Scattered relics in Eritrea as well as the traditions of the people point to an early stream of immigrants across the Red Sea. This stream never ceased: it continued through the nebulous past into recent history and even into modern days. The motives behind many of these migrations were economic - the search for land and a new livelihood, and the stimulus of trade. The latter is still paramount, though it expresses itself today less in group migrations than in the travels of individuals and in the regular flow of traffic across the Red Sea.

For the country of the Eastern Plan is poor, and its agricultural resources are insufficient to feed the population. It thus depends on imports from the rich granary of the Yemen. The ports of Eritrea are, besides, the gateways for the interior, which is equally in need of supplies from outside. Such wealth as there is in the Eastern Plain is

based on commerce, and is concentrated in the large coastal towns, Massawa and Archico.

As a gateway, the Eastern Plain faces both east and west. Indeed, economically and geographically the Eastern Plain forms a single unit with the hills and the plateau in the west. The permanent population of the coast is small, and largely limited to the few settlements which exist in the plain. The large majority of the people is nomadic, moving seasonally between the plain and the Northern Hills or the edges of the Central Plateau. These movements follows the cycle of the rains. In the winter months, during the coastal rainy season, the tribes move down to the plains and the foothills for grazing or, to a lesser extent, agriculture; in the summer, when the rains fall in the highlands, the people return to the high-lying pastures and cultivations.

The region of the Eastern Plain which we have just described ends in the south at the Bay of Zula. The plain continues south, broadening into the wide, arid depression of Dankalia. But here the economic habits of the people differ. The large nomadic tribe which inhabits this region, the Danakil, is a tribe of plainsmen, who move within the compass of the plain. The plain is cut in two by the political frontier which, running parallel to the coast at a distance of 60 Km., divides Eritrea from Ethiopia. This boundary has always been ill-defined and ineffective. Nor could it be otherwise; for more than any other frontier in Eritrea, it is merely a line drawn on the map, without ethnic or geographical justification. The Danakil tribe spreads across it, and passes it on its migrations. In this region, too, we meet with a westward traffic between the plain and the highlands. It is embodied in the ancient trade in salt which, mined in the salt pans of Dankalia, is carried on mules across the escarpment, up to the plateau region of Northern Ethiopia. Of this trade we shall hear more later.

2. Ethnic and Cultural

As we have heard, many of the tribes in the northern part of the plain are only seasonal visitors, who, at other times of the year, inhabit the Northern Hills or the Plateau. But the permanent inhabitants of the plain are equally akin to the people in the west. We meet with tribes or split-off sections of tribes whose kinsmen live in the hills, on the edges of the Plateau, or even, in one or two cases, in the Western Plain. Their mode of living is the same, and the predominant language on the coast is also the language of the Northern Hills - Tigré.

Compared with this close affinity, the link with Arabia is weak and of little social effectiveness. A number of plains-tribes claim descent from Arabia: but this tradition of origin is mostly little more than a memory, and often little less than a myth. As in so many Islamic groups, the pretence of Arabic descent is, above all, inspired by the sentiments of religious and racial prestige: nowhere does it amount to conscious kinship.

Some of the coastal groups have adopted Arabic as a second language, and have been touched by the influence of Arabian culture. But the linguistic and cultural affinity is superficial. It goes deeper only in the towns, where strangers and recent immigrants from Arabia form a considerable proportion of the population.

The people in the plain share with Arabia, above all, the religion slam. But among these scattered and heterogeneous groups the mon faith is much less of a political force than in the west of rea.

Again, this cultural region ends at the Bay of Zula. To the south, find two racial groups, which are sharply distinct from the people the north of the plain. These two groups are the Saho speaking tribes, d the Danakil.

The Saho tribes spread to the Central Plateau of Eritrea and to the stern edge of the Ethiopian highlands. Up in the highlands the tribes ve side by side with the Coptic population as nomadic visitors or as ttled guests in the territory of the highland groups. Though separated y descent, language, religion and custom, the two races live, to-day, in riendship and mutual tolerance. Apart from these relations of neighourliness, the Saho tribes represent an isolated and self-contained thnic unit.

The Danakil, reach as has been said, deep into Ethiopia. They represent the majority of the people in the Ethiopian Sultanate of Aussa. Beyond the boundaries of that territory they have no relations, or only the relations of ancient hostility and wars of self-defence — hostility towards the Ethiopians of the highlands, and self-defence against the unruly and predatory Galla tribes (see p. 13).

3. Historical

The people of the Eastern Plain have served many masters. In the 16th century the coast formed the maritime province of the Ethiopian Empire. Up to the time of the Italian occupation of the coast Ethiopia retained her rule over the plain itself, but had to cede the ports of Massawa and Archico to Turkey, in 1557. In 1865 Massawa and its hinterland became a dominion of Egypt. In 1885, finally, Massawa passed into the possession of Italy, and became the first foothold for the Italian occupation of Eritrea.

The control of Ethiopia over her distant coastal possession was spasmodic, nominal at certain times, oppressive at others. It fostered no bonds of affinity with the Mohammedan tribes of the plain; it fomented only the desire for liberty and the hate for these rulers of alien race and creed. Nor did the alien domination of Turkey, which had the limited scope of a military occupation, strike roots in the country. The Egyptian occupation seemed, at one time, close to achieving greater permanency. We have spoken of the attempts of Egypt to link her coastal possessions with those in the west, across the hills of Keren and the plateau of the Hamasien. The Egyptian dominion, short-lived, left no traces except the memory of wars and destruction.

4. Present Relations

They are determined by the life of these peoples, which are self-contained within the compass of their migrations, and concentrated upon themselves. Only in the south, among the Saho and Danakil, where this self-containedness clashed in the past, and may clash again in the future, with the political ambitions of Ethiopia, has tribal consciousness grown into political consciousness.

The Danakil like the Saho cling to the independence which characterises their lives. They have not forgotten the alien rule of Ethiopia, and the wars and oppressions with which she imposed her will. Nor have they forgotten the time when, already under Italian protection, they had to suffer the raids across the ill-controlled frontier. The Italian regime gave these tribes peace, protection of their borders, and a safeguard of their tribal integrity. To-day, the old fears are again alive. Among the Danakil, especially in the Sultanate of Aussa, these fears have fostered, once again, the preparedness for self-defence, even for war. Among the Saho tribes, they are the fears of a revival of the religious persecutions of which the rulers of Ethiopia were so often guilty.

Under the Italian regime these tribes have learned to live peacefully with their Christian neighbours. The fear that this period of tolerance would cease if one day Ethiopia revived her claims over the whole of Eritrea is strongly alive. This fear has been borne out by minor, yet significant, incidents in the recent past: the self-chosen exile, in 1941-1942, of Mohammedan families in the Tigrai, which felt no longer safe in Ethiopia; and, in 1942, the expulsion of Mohammedan herdsmen from the pastures in the Tigrai, to which they had moved on their seasonal migrations as had been their custom for generations.

IV. ERITREA AND ETHIOPIA

1. Communications and Economics

The frontier between Ethiopia and Eritrea follows the course of big rivers. They are, from west to east, the Setit, Mareb, Belesa, Geddè, and Endeli. In the extreme east, where the escarpment drops into the plain of Dankalia, there is no natural frontier, only that geographical line which runs parallel to the coast, from the Bay of Zula to Assab and French Somaliland.

South of the river-frontier lies the Ethiopian province of the Tigrai. The frontier was summarily settled in 1900, by a treaty between the Governments of Italy and Ethiopia. In one area, however, the treaty frontier and the actual border do not coincide. East of Senafe the frontier should, according to the treaty, follow the river Muna. But this stretch of the frontier was never demarcated or handed over to Italy. Faced with the reluctance of the Ethiopian Government to implement its promises in that region, the Italians accepted a de facto frontier several miles to the north. It follows the crests of mountains and narrow river valleys, flanked by Italian forts, until it reaches the deep gorge of the rivers Geddè and Endeli.

In the mountainous region in the south only a few passes lead across the frontier. In the west, in the open plain, the frontier is easy to cross, except during the rainy season, when the flooded rivers may temporarily impede the passage. The mountain passes and the tracks across the plain are ancient trade routes, travelled today as of old by numerous caravans of mules and camels. The modern roads have only supplemented, never replaced, these old communications. There are four modern roads across the frontier: from Senafe to Adigrat, and

on to Dessie and Addis Abeba; from Adi Quala to Adowa and Gondar; from Decamere and Mai Aini to Enticcio, across the Belesa; and from Om Hagar to Kafta, across the Setit. Only the first two are now passable; the Enticcio road has broken up; and the bridge across the Setit, on the Om Hagar road, was still unfinished when the war broke out.

The traffic across the frontier, by modern or traditional means, is vital to Eritrea. Indeed Eritrea and the Tigrai are economically an indivisible unit. For poor in agricultural production, the Eritrean plateau depends on imports of grain from the rich Tigrai. Ethiopia, in turn, has to rely on the import of salt, a commodity in which she is lacking, from the coast. The salt caravans into the interior of Ethiopia are an ancient institution. They travelled by two routes: one starting from Massawa and Zula, reached Adigrat and Adowa through the valley of the Haddas-river and Senafe; the other, starting from the salt lakes of Asali (south-west of the bay of Zula), skirted the escarpment and ended at Azbi in the eastern Tigrai. The first route has been superseded by the modern motor transport on the main road. The second route has lost little of its old importance.

Herdsmen, searching for pasture, too, cross the frontier freely, both from south to north and north to south. Groups from the Tigrai migrate seasonally to the grazing grounds across the Eritrean border; and groups from these regions move into the Tigrai when, in bad years, their own pastures fail.

A failure of the crops or shortage of land has also from time to time forced considerable groups of Eritreans to emigrate to Ethiopia. Thus people from the Liban district in the Serae have been emigrating during the last ten years to the district of Adi Abo across the frontier; and in 1941-42 about 2000 men from the Akkele-Guzai moved with their families and livestock to the Tigrai.

Migrations in the opposite directions do not occur - or occur no longer. When they happened, they were prompted by motives of a different nature. The last movement of whole groups took place in 1838, when a group of Ethiopian Catholics, driven from their old home at Adigrat by religious persecution, sought shelter in Italian Eritrea. But before this, innumerable immigrations must have taken place, of small groups and large, back to the days of earliest memory. These migrations are remembered in the traditions of the people, and are visible in the common civilization on both sides of the frontier. The reasons for most of these migrations from Ethiopia to Eritrea are lost in the past. Not a few were probably due to the desire to escape from a war-torn country and from the oppressions of its rulers, to the comparative peace of this distant province, where the rule of the Emperor and the feuds of rival war-lords did not reach.

2. Ethnic and Cultural

This reference to historical migrations which have helped to spread a common culture does not fully convey the nature of the kinship which links Eritrea with Ethiopia. What we find is a single race, and a single civilization, on both sides of the frontier. In other words: the people in northern Ethiopia, above all, in the province of Tigrai, belong to the Tigrinya block. In traditions or group-names there are traces

of an ancient diversity of descent: but these differences are invisible in the race of today. Certain differences of custom still separate the two countries: but they are insignificant compared with the all-embracing affinity of culture. Nor do these minor divergences follow only the political frontier; they exist equally between groups and districts within Eritrea or within Ethiopia.

The close affinity between Eritrea and the Tigrai is not equally reflected in social relationship in general, or in their most significant aspect, intermarriage. In the frontier region intermarriage has always been common; not so in the interior of Eritrea, though in Ethiopian times many of the soldiers of the Imperial troops which came to Eritrea settled in the country and took Eritrean wives. It seems to have been this unilateral political relationship which precluded free intermarriage and spontaneous contacts. The fact that from the Tigrai came also the Imperial tax-collectors and Governors, and the soldiers sent to subdue an unruly Eritrea, created a social barrier of which the people were always conscious. In the words of the people themselves: "the men from across the frontier were the lords; they were superior and domineering - how could there be intermarriage?" The exception proves the rule; for the few marriages that were arranged, and the few friendships that were struck, between the Eritreans and their neighbours were almost exclusively between powerful families and ruling houses. Political interests, the desire to ally oneself with the powers that be, were the motives which made the Eritreans agree to these unorthodox relations. Under the Italian regime, intermarriage was definitely discouraged, and Eritreans needed the special permission of their Government to ally themselves in marriage with families across the border.

To return to the description of the kinship between Eritrea and Ethiopia. We must now delimit more precisely the extension of the Tigrinya Block. In the north, it embraces the three administrative Divisions on the Central Plateau, the Hamasien, Serae, and Akkele-Guzai. It reaches beyond them only in a few instances. The Tigrinya block includes the southern districts of Keren Division, significantly called the "Abyssinian Districts"; it is represented in a small group of emigrants who have settled on the middle Gash in Agordat Division; and it is represented, finally, in groups of cultivators from the Plateau who move seasonally to the foothills of Ghinda in Massawa Division. This ethnic unit of the highland population includes one alien minority - the nomadic, Mohammedan, Saho-speaking tribes, which live between the mountains of the Akkele-Guzai and the coastal plain. We spoke of these tribes in the chapter on the Red Sea Coast, and we also mentioned that these tribes spread south, into the north-eastern part of Ethiopia.

South of the political frontier, the Tigrinya block embraces the province of northern Ethiopia known as Tigrai. It is, in reality, a twin province, divided into Eastern Tigrai (with the capital Makalle) and Western Tigrai (with the capital Adowa). The territory of this twin province is both wider and narrower than the Tigrinya block. Eastern Tigrai includes three ethnic minorities of Mohammedan, nomadic tribes; first, in the eastern districts of the Tigrai, the kinsmen of the Eritrean Saho tribes; secondly, in the east and south-east, where the Tigrai abuts on the Eastern Plain, groups of Danakil; and thirdly, astride its southern territory, the Galla tribes (in the dis-

tricts Wajerat and Chercher).

At the same time the two Tigrai provinces leave out certain Tigrinya groups. There is a Tigrinya pocket in the west, south of the Setit, in the districts of Wolkeit and Kafta, which belong politically to the old province of Western Amhara. Another, smaller, pocket of Tigrinya groups lies in the south, between Lake Ashangi and the river Ala. In pre-Italian times this area formed part of the provinces of Wagg and Angot.

The people of Eritrea and Ethiopia are well aware of this ethnic unit and its frontiers, divergent as they are from the political frontiers. For the area inhabited by the Tigrinya block is known as the *Alauha Mellash* - the country "beyond the river Ala".

For a short time after the Italo-Abyssinian war the Tigrinya block was indeed reconstituted as a single political unit. For when the Italians reorganized their new Empire they created Greater Eritrea, for which they sought the foundations of racial homogeneity. Greater Eritrea comprised, with the old Eritrea, the two Tigrai provinces (then divided between the three *Commissariati* of Adigrat, Adowa and Makalle) as well as the Tigrinya minorities outside their territory. The Tigrinya pocket in the south became, in 1935, the fourth *Commissariato* of the Eritrea south of the Mareb - the *Commissariato* of Alomata, or the *"paesi Galla"* (country of the Galla). The Tigrinya pocket in the west was incorporated in Greater Eritrea only in 1939, as the *Commissariato* of Kafta.

Beyond the Alauha Mellash we meet with new races and tribes. To the west and south lie the Ethiopian Provinces of Begemder and Wollo - once the kingdoms of Amhara and Lasta. Here the predominant race is Coptic by religion, and speaks the language of Amhara. Scattered amoung the Amharic people are the small broken-up remnants of a once powerful race which speak the ancient language of Agau or Ago; the plain to the south-east of the Tigrinya block is inhabited by the Mohammedan, nomadic Galla. Both races can be disregarded in the present account; the former because of its insignificance; the latter because it has no contacts with Eritrea and the Tigrinians(save in the form of sporadic raids on the settled highland population), and played no part in their history.

The ethnic affinity between Eritrea and Ethiopia thus ends at the border of the Tigrinya block. Though the common religion of Coptic Christianity embraces both the Tigrinya and Amharic races the difference of language, a pronounced difference in custom, and, above all, the vivid consciousness of racial diversity (in part, at least, founded on fact) create a deep gulf between the two ethnic units.

This gulf was bridged in the past by the political unity of the Ethiopian Empire. But this unity had weak foundations, and its internal rifts accentuated rather than obscured the ethnic diversity. To understand this more clearly, we must outline the history of the Ethiopian Empire, more particularly, the history of its northern dependencies, the Tigrai and Eritrea.

3. Historical

The Empire of Ethiopia was a feudal State, composed of a number of kingdoms, for ever struggling for supremacy or independence. The most important vassal kingdoms were Shoa, Gojjam, Amhara, Lasta

and Tigrai. The only binding force was embodied in the hereditar dynasty, its military power and, for a long period, its hallowed clair of descent from the House of Solomon. Attempts at a closer integratio of the Empire were short-lived, nearly always doomed to failure by th political ambitions of the vassal kings. The whole history of Ethiopi is, in fact, a constant struggle for supremacy between the Centra Government and its all-too-independent vassal States. In the remot past the Tigrai had been the centre of the Empire and had haboured its capital, the sacred city of Axum. In subsequent periods, when the centre of the Empire moved to Lasta, Amhara (Gondar), and finally Shoa (Ankober and Addis Abeba), the Tigrai remained an unruly and self-willed dominion and a rival for the supremacy in the Empire.

The historical frontier between the Tigrai and the rest of the Ethiopia was, as we have seen, essentially an ethnic frontier. Its slight ethnic inaccuracies did not detract from its political effectiveness. The gulf between the Tigrai and the Amharic provinces greatly influenced the history of the Empire. The chiefs of the Tigrai did not hesitate to accept, even to solicit, outside help against their Ethiopian rivals and overlords. In 1830 Sabagedis of Agame, one of the ablest Governors of the Tigrai, invoked the help of his British counsellors and friends, Pearce and Coffin, when he was threatened by the armies of his rivals, Ubieh of Semien (Amhara) and Narieh of Gondar. Coffin obtained 6000 rifles for his friend; but they arrived too late, when Sabagedis had already been defeated and killed in battle. In 1853 Negusse, King and Governor of the Tigrai, sent his ambassadors to France and Italy to ask for help against the Emperor. In 1868 Ras Kassa of the Tigrai (the future Emperor John) assisted Lord Napier's army against Emperor Theodore. Twenty years later Ras Mangasha, Kassa's son, sought the help of Italy against his sovereign, Menelik. Ras Kassa's plan was crowned with success; for when Emperor Theodore killed himself after the disastrous battle of Magdala, Kassa became Emperor, and the Tigrai once more the centre of the Empire. The new Empire died with John; the throne fell to the vassal king of Shoa, Menelik, the founder of the dynasty which is reigning today.

Now Eritrea was a dominion of Ethiopia, yet also a dependency of the Tigrai. These two aspects of the political status of Eritrea are not easy to delimit. But judging by the facts of more recent history, the latter aspect was the more important and effective. For till the occupation by Italy Eritrea shared the political history of the Tigrai. Eritrea was ruled by Governors (*gezza'i*) who were, in name only, representatives of the Central Government in Shoa or Amhara: in fact, they were mostly men from the Tigrai, nominated and supported by its vassal kings. Amhara and Shoa, their rulers no less than their peoples, were alien to Eritrea as they were to the Tigrai.

Yet Eritrea also possessed an identity of her own. It is expressed in the traditional name by which she was known to Ethiopia at large. As the Tigrinya countries were known as the countries "beyond the river Ala", so Eritrea was called the *Mareb Mellash* - the country "beyond the Mareb". Eritrea was the vassal State of a vassal State, and in the relations with her masters she showed the same independent spirit as did the Tigrai towards its overlords. In the greater struggle for power in the Empire Eritrea played an important part, lending her

support now to one, now to the other rival.

The rule over the *Mareb Mellash* was light and often nominal. Nor could it be otherwise in an outpost of this vast Empire, whose armies, sent to impose order, had to move through roadless country, to cross rivers impassable for half the year, and to invade the natural fortresses of mountains. Only under the Tigrinian Emperor John was Eritrea governed more effectively - in a period, that is, when the seat of Government was close and, perhaps, the gulf between rulers and ruled less wide. The gulf never quite disappeared. Like the kings of the Tigrai, the smaller vassal chiefs of Eritrea conspired with alien powers against their rulers. Thus Ras Woldenkiel, of a powerful feudal family in the Hamasien, allied himself to the Egyptians when they invaded Eritrea. When Lord Napier landed at Zula the chiefs of Eritrea, led by Dejach Hailu, also of the Hamasien, tried to forestall Ras Kassa's offer of an alliance with the British by opening themselves negotiations with Lord Napier's emissary. Finally, Dejach Bahta of the Akkele-Guzai opened the way to the Italian occupation of the Plateau in the hope that he would be rewarded with the rule of the Tigrai.

In this historical outline we spoke only of the life of the country on its highest political plane - of imperial aims and of the ambitions of chiefs and vassal kings. Indeed their history has overshadowed the life of ordinary man, and we know almost nothing about the attitude of the masses. They were probably, as in all similar political systems, inert spectators and unwilling actors of the imperial play. All they desired - and rarely found - was land on which to live and peace to enjoy the fruits of their labour.

It is in this sphere that the fifty years of Italian rule have wrought the greatest change. This period could not change the ethnic affinities or economic interdependence; nor could Italian rule change the bonds of sentiment which link the Eritrean with his brothers in the Tigrai and with the Empire of the Solomonides, though it did its best to weaken and obscure them. But the Italians created new, higher standards of living, which the people of Eritrea have learned to appreciate. Italy created, above all, a stable, ordered administration, which contrasted strongly with the precarious regime across the frontier. The danger of frontier raids by Ethiopian irregulars and bands of marauders, a danger which never abated, accentuated this contrast. Light taxation of the peasantry replaced in Eritrea the irregular, forced tribute which the Imperial Governors used to levy. And a lavish distribution of salaried offices and ranks was meant to content the chiefs and dignitaries (though severe punishment, exile to Assab or to the penal settlement on Nokra Island, was meted out with equal lavishness to the malcontent).

4. Present Relations

The varied historical motives, outlined above, all colour the present attitude of the Eritrean towards Ethiopia. It is impossible to reduce it to a simple, clear-cut formula. The Eritreans are strongly conscious of the separate identity of their country. But the sentimental attachment to the Tigrai, the consciousness of racial and economic unity with that country, and the memory of a long common history, are equally alive. Nor is a sentimental attachment to the Ethiopian Empire

and to the throne of the Solomonides wholly absent. The memory o Ethiopia's ancient glory, of her famous Emperors and warlords, onl too easily obscures the other memories, of oppressions and rebellions and of the incessant fights for independence.

These bonds of sentiment affect the younger and the older generation differently. The young men, especially of the educated class are attracted by the new glory of the Empire re-born. They want to share its future, which they view as one of national aggrandizement based on a strong direct administraion on European lines, and entrusted to the young and educated, that is, to themselves. The economic stress in post-war Eritrea, an aftermath of the collapse of Italian rule, cannot but set off this wishful picture of a powerful and prosperous Ethiopia. Yet a certain disappointment is already discernable. For its seems that the Emperor does not favour the Eritreans or Tigrinians as candidates for important political offices. Men of Eritrean extraction who seemed destined to occupy the highest posts in the new government have been replaced by men from Addis Abeba. The old fear of seeing the Tigrai and Eritrea governed by aliens from Shoa or Amhara is thus mingled with the enthusiasm for the liberated Ethiopia.

To this party of Eritrean "irridentists" also belong certain prominent religious leaders in Eritrea, above all, the two Bishops of the Coptic Christians and the Catholics of Ethiopian Rite. The reason is not quite clear; nor is it easy to understand how these heads of rival churches found themselves in the same camp. Probably they are hoping that the union with Ethiopia, with its more powerful clergy and more ignorant peasantry, would enhance also the waning powers of the Eritrean church.

The older men view the future with scepticism. Many realize with regret the threat to the Ethiopia they remember - the mediaeval Empire, ruled by hereditary kings and feudal chiefs. But many realize, too, that were this Empire to survive, it would survive in all its precarious instability. The political situation in the Tigrai is a clear example. Ras Seium, descendant of Emperor John and hereditary Lord of Adowa and Western Tigrai, who helped the British and the Emperor to liberate Ethiopia, has disappeared from the political scene. The Emperor would not appoint him Governor of Western Tigrai, the old fief of his family, for fear that in his own country the Ras would (as his ancestors before him) become too powerful and independent. Ras Seium was appointed Governor of Eastern Tigrai instead, but even this only in name; for shortly afterwards he was recalled to Addis Abeba, where he has been kept for months in ill-disguised captivity. Other chiefs of old ruling houses, like Dejach Kassa of Agame, or Dejach Gebriet, who succeeded Seium in Adowa, shared Seium's fate; after a short reign they were deposed, recalled to Addis Ababa, and prevented from returning to the old fiefs. But during the short time when, immediately after the reconquest of Ethiopia, these chiefs and feudal lords were still in power, no sound co-operation evolved between them. Intrigues and jealousies were rife, setting one against the other, and all against the Central Government. Other minor chiefs are even now refusing by force of arms to submit to the sovereignty of Addis Abeba; in their desert or mountain fastnesess they created enclaves "without the law", where the world of the Emperor does not reach. Again, then, the Empire is labouring under the old difficulties of government. The result is once more,

weakness of control, rebellions within and raids across its frontiers.

The masses want, now as always, peace and security. A heavily armed Ethiopia, rent by internal feuds and suffering from the violent repercussions of a change of regime, seems unable, for the moment, to promise either.

This confused outlook, coloured by regret for past glory and fears for the future, expresses itself, as so often among peoples of a mystic bend, in legends which rationalize in persuasive terms the difficulties of the present and hold out some vague hope for times to come. The legend in this case concerns the father of the present Emperor, the famous Ras Makonnen, once Governor of Harrar and General under Emperor Menelik. As the legend has it, Ras Makonnen, though his death was officially reported, never died. He is said to be still alive, and to wander about from monastry to monastry in the Tigrai and Eritrea. To the people he was, or would have been had he become Emperor, a model ruler. He was just, good and peace-loving; his reign would have been blessed with greatness and peace. One day, the people feel, he may yet bring these gifts to the suffering nation. It is no accident that the legend is current above all in Eritrea and the Tigrai; indeed there are men who maintain that they saw Ras Makonnen recently in a monastry in the Serae. A certain prophecy is linked with this mythical figure. On the eve of the Italo-Ethiopian war Makonnen is believed to have dissuaded the people of Ethiopia and Eritrea from taking up arms: for the rule of Ethiopia could fall neither to Italians nor Ethiopians, but to a man "from the East, who had holes in his hands". This mystic prophecy received an amusing and not uninteresting interpretation in the early days of the British occupation of Eritrea. The people in many parts of the country saw in the perforated East African coins which we introduced the fulfilment of the prophecy - lying flat on the palm they made the "hole in the hand" of which the prophecy speaks. The British then, are, in this version of the prophecy, the predestined rulers of Ethiopia.