Colonialism as State-Maker in the History of the Horn of Africa: A Reassessment

Giampaolo Calchi Novati

The main colonial power in the Horn of Africa resulted to be Italy. Despite its ambitions, Italy did not have the full capacities to transform institutions and economy of the region’s states and nations. At the very moment of the end of colonialism, the colonial geopolitics was disregarded. A sui generis decolonization rather abided by long-term historical trends. However, half century later, following local crises the state-maker functions of colonialism have been re-established with the independence of Eritrea and the fragmentation of Somalia.

Cleavages and Tensions

Geography determines the Horn’s politics as much as anything else in its history and social makeup. The balance of power and quest for hegemony in the area that encompasses the present-day states of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti, in addition to Sudan – the link between the proper Horn and the Nile Valley – present a complex multi-faceted picture, with numerous inter-linkages. First of all, the systems of government that were designed to facilitate control over land and people accentuated the cleavages and contrasts between groups in power and subordinate or discriminated groups. Anti-hegemonic resistance movements played a crucial role in defining regional politics. The domestic dimension is the most important. It is present throughout the entire history of the Horn and has survived and persisted even when the Horn has been under the influence and control of external forces as during the colonial era and in the years of confrontation between East and West. The second dimension of the conflict is more strictly regional. The states and the people of the Horn tend to interact and communicate with one another rather than with outsiders. The traditions of statehood differ greatly from country to country and constitute an element of tension as many states fear that the presence of an opposite model in the vicinity could destabilize or bring into question their very existence. The main threats come from within the region: geopolitical strife over land, water, ports and human and economic resources. The third level of tension and conflict is represented by the role of European colonialism, which although it may present characteristics of an external dimension, was a form jurisdiction exercised in loco through direct supremacy. The main colonial powers involved in the Horn were Italy and England. France weighed in as a colonial power with a few possessions (the small French Somalia, the current Republic of Djibouti), but also because it competed with Italy and England for influence in the region. The colonial period (1869-1941) witnessed the peak of interference by external forces contending for

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1 Giampaolo Calchi Novati is professor of History of Africa at the University of Pavia: cngp@unipv.it.
political dominance and appropriation of strategic assets. After all, colonialism did not destroy internal hierarchies. It greatly addressed political and economic assets of the area, but was perceived and accepted in different ways by groups at different levels of power, many of whom showed support and complicity. The European powers exploited internal differences in order to pursue their own interests, supporting those who could best serve their expansionist intentions. During different periods, Egypt, the states of North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East as well as the superpowers at the center of the global system (particularly after 1945) have all acted as external forces in the Horn.

The *Leitmotiv* of the conflict in the Horn consists of the tension between the “centers” at the regional level – the most powerful and prestigious forces in the respective areas – and the vassals or “peripheral” populations and communities in search of realization and emancipation. Nothing is capable of uniting a human reality into a collective national mission better than memory. The archaeological relics, the obelisks, the tombs, and the ruins of the buildings that pertained to the powerful and educated elites, are direct evidence of past grandeur and account for the sense of superiority of those in power. The former empires were replaced by modern states that embraced and reinforced old myths, adapting them to their own objectives. The Horn remains in a condition of permanent instability due to the unresolved conflicts between groups that, for reasons of nationality, linguistic and cultural affiliation, social status, etc., hold or are close to the power and the groups that, for the same reasons but vice versa, are or feel excluded, exploited and marginalized. The imperial control has intermittently been challenged by local resistance movements, committed in their own right to constructing kingdoms and identities.

The geographical and historical center of the Horn was the Abyssinian Empire – later, Ethiopia. Ethiopia underwent a process of deep centralization of power around the dynasty and the national Christian Church and was characterized by a feudal mode of settlement and agricultural-based production. “Ethiopia’s historical ruling elites have produced Africa’s modern most enduring idea of state, replete with myths of biblical lore, the glories of ancient Axum, and the splendor of Gondarine courts, to justify post-colonial conquest”\(^3\). The Addis Ababa Government had the “sacred” duty of defending the Great Tradition of the Empire and would not tolerate any infringement upon its multinational and multiethnic features\(^4\). History was instrumental in supporting Ethiopia’s claims to Eritrea and the Ogaden region. The two very different regimes of Haile Selassie and Mengistu Haile Mariam both persistently countered the irredentist struggle of the former Italian colony Eritrea, dubbing it as secessionism.

Sudan, in the Upper Nile, played a similar role to that of Ethiopia. Sudan was the main competitor in the Horn to Abyssinia for influence over and ownership of the Nile waters. Like Ethiopia, Sudan built up a robust central state, “civilizing” its periphery through coercion or assimilation, from north to south. As a self-legitimizing saga, Sudan’s Axum was represented by the Kingdom of Kush-Meroe. During the height of the Axumite and Kushitic empires, Somalia and the southern provinces of Sudan were considered merely distant areas that could provide gold, ivory, incense and slaves to the ruling power centers. The “metaphysics” of empire applies both to Ethiopian-Somali

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\(^4\) Levine (1974).
relations and to the problems related to Southern Sudan that Sudanese regimes had to cope with.\(^5\)

The power of Ethiopia and Sudan was based, above all, on ethnicity and religion. Kinship and religious affinities transcend national borders. Since many borders in the Horn were poorly demarcated and contested by some governments, the political order harboured a permanent threat. Religion was an important leverage in the hands of the ruling powers and was used as an incentive for expansion, conquest and occupation. The opposition between Christianity and Islam has been a constant over time. Christianity was a decisive component of the strategy pursued by the Abyssinian Court, together with the support of the army. Given that Ethiopia was surrounded to a great deal by Islamic populations, religion has been one of the main factors in the growing tension between Ethiopia and its neighbors since Medieval times. The imperial project, as interpreted by Ethiopia, called for opposition to the state of Somalia, or in other words, to the power of the authorities that ruled the lowlands inhabited by Somali-speaking people. The Muslim faith, other than language, represented the main point of reference in terms of identity in the context of a fluid and volatile system of government. As a result of the expansion of the indigenous community, Ethiopia can no longer be considered a “Christian nation”: Ethiopian Muslims are present throughout the country and are concentrated in the southern, eastern and western peripheries.\(^6\)

Unlike Ethiopia with its epic history focused on affirmation of Christianity, in Sudan the Arab-Muslim elite have always had the upper hand, opposing surrounding peoples and polities with long and more contemporary Christian histories. The North’s hegemony depends on Arabization, while at the same time, Arabization is the cause of unrest in the southern provinces.

**Colonialism in Action**

With colonialism, a minority of a different cultural or religious origin, intervenes by force, tampering with the already existing territorial and national assets. The colonial force takes whatever it needs for the profit of the metropolitan center, using forced labor in the form of *corvées*, servitude or slavery, natural resources and strategic assets. Italy wanted to occupy the land in order to establish colonies while the main objective of England was control of the water: the Nile Basin and the routes to India through the Suez Canal, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Colonialism forever changed the populations or the elites that were subjugated by way of institutional, productive and cultural transformations. Ethiopia and Sudan resisted more than others thanks to their political and military might and were able to participate in and benefit from international diplomacy (Menelik was in contact with England and Italy and, with the outbreak of hostilities beyond the River Mareb, received assistance from France; Mahdi was still bound to his special relationship with the Ottoman Empire).\(^7\) The inclusion of the peripheral non-Christians in Ethiopia and the non-Muslims or non-Arabs in Sudan, at first nominally, became a reality at the cost of creating potential hotbeds of resistance and conflict. The victory of Menelik in Adowa saved Ethiopia. However, Ethiopia paid a high price for colonialism, losing definitively access to the sea. Oddly enough, the resounding victory of Adowa did not stop the progression of Africa’s partition and perhaps even accelerated Europe’s conquest of the region. In the aftermath of the

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\(^7\) Egypt’s rulers were interested in maintaining a weaker and dependent state on their southern side.

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Adowa battle, the Egyptians and British resolved to carry on with the final attack on the state founded by Mahdi, lest Menelik’s victory boosted the strength and hostility of the Dervishes.

The formal and efficient administration of the European powers dislodged the pre-existing powers. The colonial interlude was a critical juncture for the formation of states and nations. With a more effective management of territory and resources, colonialism nonetheless led to chronic instability due to dissent, protest to the occupation, loss of sovereignty and the expropriation of community goods. The endurance of Ethiopian independence in 1896 was a result of national mobilization and the capacity of the imperial hierarchy to hold onto power and safeguard the motherland.\footnote{Rubenson (1976: 408-409).} In Somalia, resistance’s performance to Italian and English occupation was more successful in the areas where tribal authority was better organized.

The means of “pacification” differ depending on the characteristics of the local community. Colonialism as such amplifies the importance of ethnicity because in a situation of assertion of a foreign culture, dominance and expropriation, clan affiliation and lineage become the most suitable means of survival. The communities that had suffered from other forms of domination before the advent of European colonialism, had a different attitude towards colonial rule than those communities that had always held the power in their own hands. The privileged groups resisted colonialism on principle as well as for self-interest while the subordinate groups struggled to create viable and oppositional states not only in response to the abuse of power by the stronger states but also due to their associative history, the ecological conditions of their natural environment or the economic-social organization of their communities. Colonialism can help the yesterday’s vanquished to rectify their position of inferiority. In the official history of African decolonization there is a tendency to disregard those societies (or “tribes”) that showed a positive attitude towards colonialism, often referring to them as “collaborators” while eulogizing as “nationalists” those societies that opposed and repudiated colonialism. The forms of nationalism shaped or supported by the colonial rulers, however, take on a new force when they are used in opposition to a dominant power. “The colonial experience left a lasting legacy either by separating subject peoples from the ruling centers and thus liberating them from traditional obligations or by institutionalizing pre-existing relations of domination.”\footnote{Ruth (2001: 113).}

After having played the Tigrayan card against the Showa during the fight with Menelik at the end of the XIX century, Italian colonialism widely exploited the internal cleavages during the time of Africa Orientale Italiana (AOI) whereas Ethiopia was finally occupied by Mussolini’s army (1936-41). Italy lacked the financial and technical resources, as well as the time, to effect a comprehensive transformation of the economy and society of Eastern Africa. Nevertheless, Italy believed it was possible to change the very soul of the region’s states by manipulating boundaries, land property\footnote{Haile Mariam (1994)}, the hierarchical balance of the elites and major ethnic groups or nations\footnote{Calchi Novati (2005: 47-74).}. Italy’s colonial administration in Eastern Africa constantly exploited issues of identity such as religion, culture and shared values. The objective was to cut the peripheries off from the established centers of power, giving the subjugated populations the illusion of having been “liberated”. Ogaden, a semi-desert area inhabited by Somali-speaking nomads,
was separated from Ethiopia and annexed to Somalia in order to create a sort of ethno-
national homogeneity. This precedent would prop up the advent of Pan-Somalism as a 
reunification of the idealized Somali nation\textsuperscript{12}. Also in the north of Ethiopia, the 
Empire’s territory was cut, this time in order to enlarge Eritrea. The Deputy General-
Governor of AOI, Enrico Cerulli, had always cherished the idea, which he had 
elaborated in his capacity as a prominent scholar, to support the peripheral nomadic 
Muslim peoples at the expense of the Christian plateau-dwellers. In Eritrea, the colonial 
government’s practices were differentiated in order to take account of and enhance the 
various local traditions and identities in a continuous interplay between administration 
and ethnography\textsuperscript{13}. Italy maintained to make use of scientific parameters, but the 
reorganization spawned the emergence of racial prejudices and political maneuvers 
aimed at wearing down Abyssinian resistance by dividing and subjugating the Showa-
Amhara elite who were at the core of the Empire ruled by Haile Selassie.

Eritrean nationalism and Pan-Somalism came fully emerged to the surface with the 
end of colonialism. Colonialism helped them in many ways to form. The main argument 
in favor of the Eritrean Liberation Front’s strong opposition to incorporation of the 
former Italian colony into the Ethiopian Empire, was the colonial predicament. Some 
influence also came from the British Military Administration, operative in the ex-Italian 
territories from 1941 until the decision taken by the UN General Assembly in 1949-50 
regarding their future. Great Britain kept the fate of Eritrea on hold and carried on for a 
few years with separate administration of the Ogaden and the other scraps of Ethiopian 
territory, such as the Haud, inhabited by Somalis, on the border with British Somaliland.

Colonialism in the Horn altered the previous pattern of domination and subordination 
within states and the balance of power between states at the regional level. Colonialism 
was a new phenomenon in terms of duration and intensity and its effect was not 
balanced between countries. The superiority of states with imperial traditions – Ethiopia 
and Sudan – outlived colonialism. Their longstanding institutions guaranteed a special 
force and determination. However, both Ethiopia and Sudan had to use coercive 
measures and, when necessary, take up arms to control their riotous peripheries, pushed 
by colonialism to fight for decentralization and autonomy. Somalia emerged as a unitary 
state as a result of colonialism and decolonization. As for revisionism and irredentism, 
Eritrea had ties to South Sudan, however, at the same time, showed strong kinship with 
the highland Tigrayans dwelling in Ethiopia. Broadly reshaped by the half-century 
domination of Italian colonialism, a good deal of Eritrea’s political body strongly 
rebuffed the “imperial” solution pursued by Addis Ababa\textsuperscript{14}.

The Special Case of Eritrea

The colonial administration in Eritrea, unlike in Ethiopia which had been invaded but 
ever colonized, had sufficient time to implement in-depth institutional and social 
reorganization. Eritreans were thoroughly immersed in colonialism and became 
accustomed to day-to-day life under European rule. For 50 years or so they spoke Italian 
as their \textit{lingua franca}. Italy saw to the delineation of boundaries, completing a process

\textsuperscript{12} At the end of WWI, a territorial agreement between Italy and England had already enlarged the 
territory of Italian Somalia with the annexation of Jubaland, which previously was part of British 

\textsuperscript{13} Sorgoni (2001: 231).

\textsuperscript{14} On the controversial origin of Eritrean nationalism, see Alemseged (1998); Jordan (1989); Le Houérou 
that had been initiated by the Egyptians\(^{15}\) and also introduced bureaucratic administration and territorial centralization, promoting law and order. Eritrea’s “colonial society” revealed itself to be more manageable and compliant than its counterpart in Somalia. A great deal of Eritreans enrolled into the colonial militias (ascari) which fought alongside Italy both in Ethiopia and Libya\(^{16}\).

The literature presents a variety of assessments on the effective transformation of the colonia primogenita into a modern society in pursuit of statehood and nationhood. The work of colonialism as state-maker was not confined to the demarcation of frontiers. In fact, the primary contribution of Italian rule was to establish a system based on capitalist principles and a hierarchically structured society according to a center-periphery scheme that would engender the creation of a common identity\(^{17}\). Before Italian colonialism, the interaction between various ethno-linguistic groups in Eritrea had been insufficient to give rise to a single political entity with common institutions and shared symbols. Although Italy did not fulfill the expectations of the imperialist ideologues, it did undertake vast material and socio-cultural activities: “If both export production and markets remained relatively small, this was due to lack of ‘development’ through investment rather than the colony’s poverty”\(^{18}\). The boom in public works and the chain of small industries which flourished during the administration of the AOI opened up the need for local manpower, which was in turn made available due to the land shortage caused by confiscations. This process had the effect of accelerating the disintegration of feudal ties as landless peasants were effectively converted into wage laborers or employees. “The period of Italian rule contributed by its very length to the strengthening of Eritrean awareness, especially among those who underwent urbanisation or served in the bureaucracy and army, although the Italians did very little to promote internal social cohesion”\(^{19}\). Other authors appear less convinced about the long-term effects of Italian colonialism. Alemseged Abbay deems the Italian influence “minimal” in transforming the life and culture of the indigenous people\(^{20}\). “Eritrea nationalism did not emerge as a reaction to colonial situation. It made its appearance after the collapse of Italian rule, when the fate of the former colony hung in the balance”\(^{21}\). Some of the professional historians and sociologists who tackle the “Eritrean question” seem impressed by the economic progress, expansion of education and political liberalization that took place during the British period between 1941 and 1952\(^{22}\). “For the first time in the history of Eritrea, the people were not only allowed but even encouraged to establish appropriate political organisations”\(^{23}\).

\(^{15}\) Tzehaines (1995: 199). The notion of frontiers was mainly a European construct that colonialism had transplanted in Africa.

\(^{16}\) Le Houérou (2000). According to Gennaro Mondaini, the conquest of the Ethiopian Empire, siding with the Italians, had the value of a national enterprise for Eritreans and Somalis (1941: 377).


\(^{18}\) Yemane (1988: 222).


\(^{20}\) With regard to Kebessa, he states that: “Even if urbanization, access to consumption goods as well as adoption of Western values and etiquette were the litmus tests for modernization, only an insignificant section of the population, mostly in Asmara, would pass for being ‘modernized’” (Alemseged Abbay, 1998: 5, 25).

\(^{21}\) Markakis (1988: 51).

\(^{22}\) Trevaskis (1960).

\(^{23}\) Tekeste (1997: 24).
End of colonialism and access to independence

As a result of the events of World War II, Italy lost all of its colonial possessions in Eastern Africa. The colonial infrastructure and military apparatus surrendered to British troops and to the Emperor’s army in 1941. The AOI was dismembered. Although it did not acquire influence and/or prestige enough to pave the way for a return to Africa, Italy left an imprint on the Horn’s institutional, social and economic structure. Traces of the Italian presence are still visible, particularly in terms of urban solutions, food, customs and even, to a certain extent, linguistic and cultural expressions. The long-term consequences of colonialism on society, its impact on the mentality of the elite and the collective imagery did have some bearing on the political life in the Horn throughout the XX century. However, Italy proved a negligible agent in a political space that had been under its jurisdiction. Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea were very much in charge of their own political destinies, but also trapped in a milieu of intense and often violent confrontation. In this regard, Ethiopia took the lead cementing a strong agreement with the United States. Ethiopia and Sudan both assumed an air of ethno-historical superiority in order to justify their pre-colonial relations of dominance respectively with Eritrea and the Southern Sudanese provinces of former Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. This attitude, in turn, led to widespread disaffection and alienation.

The terms of the 1947 Peace Treaty obliged Italy to formally renounce of all of its colonies and the treaty acknowledged the full sovereignty of Ethiopia. The UN debate was disappointing from the Italian point of view. Rome lost almost everything. Eritrea was proclaimed an autonomous unit federated to Ethiopia. Only poor Somalia was put under Italian administration as a trusteeship territory for a ten-year period. The Italian Trust Administration of Somalia (AFIS) exported into Africa, at least to some extent, Italy’s new democratic profile. Italian authorities established a difficult relationship with the most dedicated and militant nationalist movement, the Somali Youth League (SYL). Their converging interests made it relatively easy to work together to build up the new state. Haile Selassie showed open disdain for the fact that Italy was responsible for the administration of a territory that bordered Ethiopia. Some ministers and personalities in Addis Ababa took for granted the fact that Italy was plotting to re-establish a semi-colonial presence in the Horn. Haile Selassie himself maintained that Italy, condemned as an aggressor and defeated in the war, was not entitled to look after the implementation of the UN resolution in Eritrea. In the end, Italy was powerless when Ethiopia’s abuses led to the abolishing of the Eritrea-Ethiopia federation.

The people of Eritrea, through the mouthpiece of their political associations, could reasonably claim that they had not had the chance to freely choose their own destiny. The federation was short-lived and in November 1952 the Eritrean Assembly, persuaded by military pressure from Ethiopia, voted for the incorporation of the former Italian colony into the Ethiopian Empire as a province. Ethiopia’s rulers in the XX century, especially Haile Selassie, “came to regard access to the Red Sea as the cornerstone of their foreign policy; this goal [Eritrea] supplanted the earlier zeal for southward

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26 Rossi (1980).
27 UN resolution 390-A(V) of 2 December 1950 provided that Eritrea should “constitute an autonomous unit federated with Ethiopia under the sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown”.
28 The main grievance by Michela Wrong is that the world at large betrayed Eritrea when the federation was abolished (2005: 183).
expansion”29. Such a move did not abide by the principle of individual self-determination, in the process of decolonization, as a acknowledged right of all colonial territories throughout Africa30. The nation itself could be considered a product of colonial power31. Apparently, the achievements of colonialism in the Horn were emasculated by local and national priorities. The infringement of the colonial legacy was complete when the former British Somaliland32 merged with the Italian possession, joining the Republic of Somalia, which gained independence in 1960 (with Mogadishu as the capital city). While Eritrea, Somalia and Djibouti owed much of their political infrastructure to colonialism, the Ethiopian and Sudanese states maintained their pre-colonial stances, based on conquest and hegemony. Irredentist drives of the entities north of the river Mareb and south of the Sudd, which sought equitable institutional alternatives to the colonial or post-colonial status quo, illustrated the fragility of the entire situation.

From the time of independence onwards, the political situation in the Horn was characterized by rivalries between the old states and the new states. The states with stronger traditions managed to take back control of their peripheries. The longue durée was in opposition to the innate restlessness of the subordinate populations. The attempt to detach the peripheries from the centers gives the impression of being a sort of revaluation of colonialism. Ethiopia has a strong history, but it does not counteract the strong ethno-religious differences and does not erase the memory of slavery and mischief of power. When Haile Selasse returned to Ethiopia, he sought to appeal to both the Ethiopians and the Eritreans, but each interpreted his words differently. The particularities of the experience of Eritreans as colonial subjects distinguished them from the polity which now hoped to bring them under their control. Ethiopia was at war with both Somalia (for the Ogaden region, but in final analysis, for the differing concepts of statehood to which the two states aspired) and Eritrea (before and after its independence). Pan-Somalism was in opposition to the established states. Thanks to Italian and British politics, Mogadishu established itself as a “new center” and proved to be quite attractive. The reassertion of Somalia was essentially a direct attack on the territorial integrity of Ethiopia and Kenya. Mogadishu did not recognize the territorial divisions made during the Scramble nor the later realignment of borders led by the UN nor any other diplomatic and political steps taken after the end of colonialism. The fusion of the two Somalias created an initial sense of accomplishment for the Pan-Somalism but was in contradiction to the tendency to exert the right to territorial self-determination along the colonial geopolitics.

The 30-year guerrilla campaign launched in the early 1960s by the Eritrean liberation movement ended in May 1991 with the unexpected military victory of David, and not of Goliath. In the same days, the Derg regime in Addis was overthrown by guerrillas from the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). The fact that the EPLF and TPLF had fought side-by-side against a common enemy ensured a period of “understandings” between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The EPLF had provided the Tigrayans of TPLF, its comrades in war, with arms and logistical support. The golden era of Eritrea, when everything seemed possible, was, however, rapidly tarnished. The post-independence

32 Colonialism only slightly changed the economic and social structures in British Somaliland, the Cinderella of the British Empire, because it’s main function was to provide food for the Aden base.
revisionism of Asmara was aimed mainly at counteracting the primacy of Ethiopia. The conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia (1998-2000) broke out because of a minor border dispute in an area whose confines had been agreed upon by Menelik and the Italians at the turn of the century. Ostensibly, the real *casus belli* was more sophisticated.33

The 1991 Breakthrough as a Colonial Retribution

The former Italian possessions were particularly vulnerable to “Africa’s crisis” because of their isolation from the most important economic and financial flows, in large part due to their traditional European patron’s feebleness. In Ethiopia and Somalia, ravaged by war and drought, the traumas of transition have dramatically shattered political stability. Clearly, the Italian influence did not provide a sufficient shield in this respect. For other reasons, connected to its geo-strategic position between Arab Africa and black Africa, Sudan also experienced long periods of war after independence. The Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA) signed in 2005 between the central government and the SPLM/A granted the southern provinces the right to opt for independence within a few years, and thus opened a chapter of uncertainty as to the fate of the unitary state.

The end of the civil war in Somalia led also to the definitive end of Somalia as it was constituted in 1960. The long-term historical dispersion of Somali statehood and nationhood outweighed the recently-born formalized state, leaving the power in the hands of the clans and diaspora communities – the primary vehicles of Somali ethnic and cultural identity. The Somali state committed a veritable “suicide”: when Siyad Barre, defeated by the precarious coalition of various militias, abandoned Mogadishu in January 1991, the central authority collapsed and tribal anarchy spread, while the warlords held onto control of their respective areas of sovereignty. The post-colonial Somali state fell into the condition of a “quasi-state”34. The central government enjoyed juridical sovereignty but was unable to exercise it within its territory. Clanism chased the pursuit of an irredentist, outward-oriented nationalism.

Furthermore, as a consequence of the all-out war that accompanied the disintegration of the Siyad Barre regime, the former British Somaliland reclaimed its autonomy. Even if the local authorities did not request formal international recognition, they started to behave as an independent state. The former British possession, less affected by colonial reforms and keen to the pastoral ethos of nomads, had consistently expressed its hesitancy to adapt to the cultural pattern of the rest of Somalia where the urban and agricultural way of life reflected greater progress35. The leaders of Somaliland did not take part in the elusive diplomatic efforts to reinstate a unitary Somali government and decided to go it alone.

The civil war in Ethiopia had less devastating consequences. The collapse of the Derg regime, when Mengistu Haile Mariam fled and what remained of the dying regime surrendered to the guerrillas led by the TPLF in the new form of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), did not disrupt the state and its institutions like in Somalia. The longstanding tradition of firm statehood allowed Ethiopia to survive the turmoil. However, the government established by the TPLF put an end to the official state ideology. The concepts of centralization and hegemony which had been fundamental to the power structure in Addis for centuries, from the Axum kingdom

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33 Ruth (2000); Tekeste and Tronvoll (2001); Jacquin-Berdal and Plaut (2004); Reid (2004).
34 Jackson (1990).
35 Lewis (1961).
onwards, and which had even driven the military revolution of the Derg in 1974, vanished. The post-Derg regime acknowledged for the first time that the periphery of the former empire had the same ranking as the traditionally dominant elite. The unstated motive behind this rethinking of Ethiopian statehood recalls the strategy that once inspired Italian colonial policy: undermining and crippling the power of the Amharas. Ethiopia buried its hegemonic past. The former empire has been reshaped as a federation of nominally semi-autonomous provinces divided on the basis of ethnicity. The Constitution affirmed the principle of self-determination up to secession, only dictating the complicated procedures to be followed to ensure that the secession is legal and authorized.

The independence of Eritrea desecrated the dogma of inviolability of boundaries. In a way, this independence represented the “return” of an ex-colony to its individuality and identity. Whether reality or invention, Eritrea was an Italian “artifact”. Despite a certain aura of anti-colonialism throughout the history of Eritrean nationalism, the colonial experience facilitated its distance from Ethiopia. The separation of British Somaliland from the Republic of Somalia moved in the same direction. In this case, however, it was not Italy, but Great Britain, to profit. Even the semi-victory of London confirmed the grand vitality of colonialism as state-maker in Africa. The situation in Sudan is more complex. Until the very end, Great Britain, after rejecting the idea to unite Egypt and Sudan into a single state, had to decide between the unitary solution and the division of Sudan. The Christian black South held more similarities with Uganda and the Africa of the Great Lakes rather than with the Arab-Islamic North and Arab Africa at large. Khartoum, the capital of the state, reaffirmed the traditional preponderance of the North without managing, however, to develop an inclusive policy that could make the South feel an integral part of the state. The upheaval and later on the semi-independence of the southern provinces of Sudan recalled the old divisions along ethnic, linguistic and religious lines – components which were affected by the diverse level of intensity of the colonial predicament.

When Italian and British rule in the Horn ended, the “colonial” standard was temporarily broken. For about 40-50 years, the institutional pattern mirrored a certain idea of the “authentic” history of Ethiopia and Somalia (and Sudan). But, the colonial phenomenology proved, in the long run, to be stronger than the Great Traditions of Ethiopia and Pan-Somalism in the Somali context. Clan affiliation and lineage acted as a tool for self-defense under colonial rule and resurfaced as potent instruments for unification once colonialism finished and forgotten. The reassessment of states and nations multiplied in the post-colonial order due to fresh formulations of collective security which, abrogating the Cold War praxis, promoted or accommodated the “balkanization” of the established states for the sake of the Neo-Empire.

36 The different meaning of Eritrea and Ethiopia was defined or redefined by the war of 1998 and the virulent propaganda of ideologues from both sides encouraging divisions between the cross-border populations (Gilkes, 2004: 249).
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