

Potential conflicts in the former Gash-Setit region, western Eritrea: threats to peace and Security

By

Alexander Naty, Ph.D. *

Introduction

There has been a belief among scholars that modernization would put to an end to ethnic groups and ethnic-based conflicts. This idea is held both by scholars of liberal as well as Marxist philosophical stance. Contrary to this expectation ethnic groups and ethnic-based tensions and conflicts are still prevailing in our world. Although ethnicity as a primordial phenomenon Clifford Geertz (1973) has been criticized, its persistence ironically seems to reinforce the primordial character of ethnicity. The irony is that ethnic groups have increased in number and many of them are involving themselves in struggles for political autonomy. Anthropologist Eric Wolf (2001) has recently pointed out that most of the conflicts in the contemporary world are fought between nation-states and minorities or indigenous ethnic groups. Some movements struggle to gain autonomy and control of their material and cultural resources. Others fight in order to establish independent states.

This essay explores issues that are related to ethnicity and ethnic-based tensions and conflicts in the former Gash-Setit region, western Eritrea.¹ The paper investigates factors that contribute to tensions in the area. This include the settlement of populations, the adoption of ill-formulated policies by the state of Eritrea, the condescending attitudes of some ethnic groups towards others and the working of the legacy of historical animosity among the various ethnic groups inhabiting the district. The data for the writing of this paper is from the field research the writer has carried out in 1999 in the region. Methods of data collection include participant observation and interviewing.

In Eritrea there has been a conviction among many Eritreans that Eritrean national identity is more pronounced than ethnicity. Another belief among the elite and the common folk is that ethnic-based conflicts can never surface in Eritrea. The reason for this, they argue, has to do with the thirty years of liberation struggle. According to the adherents of this view members of the nine different ethnic groups of the country had participated in the armed struggle.² As a result, sub-national identities and sentiments such as ethnicity have been replaced by broader and more encompassing Eritrean identity. Thus, in Eritrea discourse (i.e. writing and talking) about ethnicity has been limited. Be that as it may, the state of Eritrea encourages certain aspects of ethnicity. For example, the cultural performances of the different ethnic groups have been encouraged. One often notices this aspect of ethnicity during important occasions such

* Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Asmara , P.O. Box 1220, Asmara, Eritrea , E-mail: gnaty2002@yahoo.com . Phone: 291-1-16-19-26 , Fax: 291-1-16-22-36

as the Independence Day (May 24) and the yearly festival that is held in Asmara around the month of August. The festival is a substitute for the Bologna festival that used to be performed in Bologna, Italy during the period of the liberation struggle. During this festival in Asmara not only ethnic dances are performed, but the whole material culture of the different ethnic groups including their traditional houses and food are displayed.

Another aspect of ethnicity that the Eritrean government encourages is the education in vernacular languages for the school children. These children pursue their primary education (i.e. grade one to five) in their respective mother tongues. Some Moslem communities in Eritrea are skeptical of the policy of mother tongue education. The elite from these societies believe that the government is pursuing this policy in a conspiratorial way. They argue that the different local languages cannot compete with Tigrinnya because they have not been written languages. In contrast, Tigrinnya and to some extent the Tigre has been a written language for a relatively longer period. Therefore, the state of Eritrea is adopting the policy of mother tongue as a way of advancing Tigrinnya rather than ensuring the equality of all the nine Eritrean languages. The Moslems prefer that their children learn in Arabic. The government fears that such a policy (i.e. pursuing education in Tigrinnya and Arabic) would polarize the Eritrean society into Christians versus Moslems. This dichotomization is not liked by most Eritreans because it has fuelled tensions and conflicts during the British Military Administration in Eritrea in the 1940s and 1950s. Moreover, this categorization and its associated entrapping have resulted in the conflict between the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) in the early 1970s and 1980s.

The argument that ethnicity and ethnic-based conflicts have been transcended in the course of the thirty years of liberation struggle must be handled with some caution. It is possible that members of the different ethnic groups in Eritrea put aside their differences to engage a common enemy, Ethiopia. But that should not be the whole story. The leadership of the ELF manifested ethnic and regional problems. Indeed, this was the factor for the conflict and eventual split of the EPLF. Similarly ethnicity accounts for the hostile relationship between the ELF and the Kunama people. The post-independence political situations in Eritrea as we shall be discussing in the present paper could unleash a series of tensions and conflicts some of them related to ethnicity.

The Gash-Setit Region

Like human societies localities have their own identities. The identity of a place begins with its name. The name Gash-Setit derived from the names of two major rivers: Gash and Setit. Setit is also referred to by the name Tekezze when it reaches Ethiopia. The Kunama, the indigenous inhabitants of the area call these rivers as *Soona* and *Tiika*. The name Gash-Setit may have appeared in the map in the writings of the travelers, missionaries and colonial authorities. The Italians referred to the region as the district of Gash and Setit. Subsequent administrative regimes have adopted this name except the state of Eritrea, which changed its name to Gash-Barka in 1995 when there was a restructuring of administrative units in the country. The Gash-Barka district is larger in its territorial constitution. It incorporates the entire Barka, some parts of Hamasien and Seraye regions.

The Gash-Setit area is unique compared to other regions of Eritrea. Besides being one of the largest, the area is rich in resources. There is a great deal of fertile land for farming not only staple food crops such as sorghum, millet and a variety of legumes but also cash crops such as cotton and sesame. There has been a belief that considers the Gash-Setit region as breadbasket of Eritrea. The notion of breadbasket encourages the establishment of large-scale farms in the area. The promotion of such farms has been causing environmental degradation in the country. The Italians often reported about the agricultural potentiality of the area for cultivating cash crops such as cotton, sesame and sugar cane. In 1928 (Vittorio Nastasi and Gabriele Pollera 1974) the Italians established the Alighidir Cotton Plantation in the region, which provided cotton to the Barattolo Textile Factory in Asmara. There had been also banana and citrus fruit farms in the area. Most of the plantations were ruined during the liberation war in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Alighidir Plantation was completely destroyed by the invading Ethiopian forces during the May 2000 occupation. The Gash-Setit region is endowed with pastureland that pastoral societies graze their livestock. Communities such as the Tigre and Hedareb graze their cattle, camels and goats in the area. This situation has brought these societies in conflict with the Kunama. According to oral history the conflicts that took place between the Kunama and the coalition of Tigre, Hedareb and the Nara in the 1940s and 1950s were all caused by the competition over grazing land.

The availability of land in the Gash-Setit has encouraged human settlements. The population pressure and the scarcity of land in highland Eritrea motivated the settlement of people in the region. Communities such as the Tigrinnya settled in several places in the area giving these localities new names (for example, Himbirti, Deeda) thereby changing the identity of the areas. The economic potential of the region has enabled these settlers to acquire a lot of cattle almost transforming themselves to pastoral societies.

The Gash-Setit region is relatively rich in trees. At present the fuel wood and charcoal that the urban centers such as Asmara and Keren use come from the region.³ The highland areas of Eritrea cannot provide the inhabitants of the towns with fuel wood and charcoal because of the unavailability of trees. The populations of highland Eritrea use cow dung for firewood due to lack of wood. The excessive use of firewood and charcoal in the Gash-Setit region of course is not something to be augured. It will have the same kind of environmental consequences as in highland Eritrea in years to come.

When discussing about the resources of the Gash-Setit area, we should not forget to mention its wild life. The region has animals such as hyena, wild pigs, gazelles, elephants, monkeys and a variety of birds and reptiles. In the distant past the area was also home to lions, hippopotamuses and giraffe. But at present these animals do not exist in the region. Their presence in the past is witnessed by the names of places such as *Morkiti* (which means habitat of lions and *Darasa Mena Kutu* (which means the neck of giraffe). Changes in environment and ecology in the past may have contributed to the vanishing of these wild animals. Besides the prolonged liberation war in Eritrea had scared away the different wild animals to other neighboring countries. After the end of the war in 1991, some of the animals such as elephants began to return to the Gash-Setit area. The region around Antore, Ugaro, Dokimbia and Haykota has elephants still today. The Gash-Barka festival that was organized in August 1999 in Barentu has clearly shown the richness of fauna of the region.

The Gash-Setit area has some mineral resources. It has marble, lime and gold. Several foreign companies have been engaging in the exploration of gold. In the years 1997 and 1998 about eight firms have signed agreement with the Ministry of Mines and Energy in order to carry out exploration. In the past the Italians extracted gold from Sosona (also known as Ashoshi) and Ugaro villages. The political unrest that prevailed in Eritrea discouraged the operation of these gold mines. At present many individuals in the region are involving in the mining of gold using their traditional methods of extraction.

History of population settlements

The area did not experience population settlements from other ethnic groups in the past. The political instability that prevailed prior to the advent of the Italian colonialism did not encourage settlements. Raids and counter-raids prevailed in the region before the colonial period. The Gash-Setit did not experience any considerable settlements even during the period of the Italian colonialism as well as the subsequent regimes except after 1991. During the imperial regime many individuals from highland Eritrea migrated to different parts of Ethiopia because of the linguistic, cultural and religious affinity of the Tigrinnya people to the Amhara and the Tegreans of northern and central Ethiopia. The Tigrinnya people in highland Eritrea speak the same language that is spoken by the Tegreans in Tigray. Both Tigrinnya and Amharic belong to the Semitic language family group. The Tigrinnya and the people of north-central Ethiopia follow Coptic Christianity. Therefore, settlements in the Gash-Setit area were minimal and confined to the places that I have already mentioned.

During the imperial regime there had been settlements of few individuals from other ethnic groups in towns such as Barentu, Shambakko, Dokimbia, Tessenei and Omhajer. These settlers were mainly from the Tigrinnya and Tigre ethnic groups. These individuals owned shops and bars. The economic opportunity of the region also encouraged the settlement of police, judges and other government employees in these towns. The settlements increased alarmingly after independence of Eritrea in 1991. Since 1991 the area has witnessed the settlement of populations from other regions of Eritrea (particularly highland parts of the country), demobilized ex-fighters as well as returnees from Sudan.

Most of the returnees from Sudan have settled in the Gash-Setit region. They have established themselves in villages such as Alabu, Fanko, Garsat, Gergef, Tabaldia, Dokimbia, Omhajer and Samunait. The returnees are from diverse ethnic groups such as Tigrinnya, Tigre, Hedareb, Saho, Bilin, Nara and a few Kunama. The repatriation of refugees stopped for some time because of the political developments between the Eritrean and the Sudanese government. The process re-started on July 25, 2000 under a tripartite agreement between the governments of Sudan, Eritrea and the UNHCR. The 1998 conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia has also resulted in the settlement of the internally displaced populations from the Tigrinnya ethnic group in Kunama villages such as Delle, Tolegamaja and Karkon.

The Gash-Setit region has also settlement of demobilized fighters. These ex-fighters settled mostly in Alighidir, near the town of Tessenei. The majority of the demobilized ex-fighters are from the Tigrinnya ethnic group. In 1993 the state of Eritrea decided to

reduce the size of its army. Both economic and security factors were considered in the demobilization of the fighters. The government felt that since Eritrea was then at peace with neighboring countries, there was no reason to have a large army. The regime thought that keeping a large military would take up a great deal of financial resources. These were among the reasons that motivated the government to demobilize about 54,000 fighters (Andeberhan Wolde/Giorghis 1996:61).

Tensions in the Region

The competition over land and the settlement of diverse ethnic groups in the Gash-Setit area are in themselves sufficient factors that contribute to tensions. There are also other contributing factors. These factors include the policies of the state, the contempt of the Tigrinnya towards the other groups and the legacy of the historical animosity between the Kunama and other ethnic groups of the country.

The policy that made all land state property has encouraged the settlement of people from other regions of Eritrea in the area. The settlers compete with the local populations over the utilization of resources. The competition over scarce resources often leads to tensions. The agricultural policy of the state encourages the promotion of big commercial farms.⁵ The individuals who own these commercial farms are mostly from the Tigrinnya ethnic group. The land policy of the Eritrean government undermines the clan-based traditional ownership of land among the Kunama (Naty 2002). The general strategy of development focuses on the establishment of roads, schools, clinics and involving communities in market relations.⁶ The policy is embedded in the official document such as the Macro Policy. There have been proliferations of markets on different days of the week in the various towns in the Gash-Setit region. An interesting situation is that these markets have become the foci of ethnic interactions and tensions. The Shambakko incident that occurred in 1995 is a case in point.⁷

Shambakko is a small town located between the towns of Boshoka and Bimbilna. In March 1995 a Tigrinnya policeman killed two brothers. These individuals were Kunama from the village of Taikanaba. According to Kunama version of the story they were shot dead because they refused to sell the sorghum in the market. They did not want to sell the grain for a price they thought was low. They decided to load the sorghum in their camels and depart for Taikanaba. The policeman prevented them from going and insisted that they sell the grain. This resulted in a fight in which the two brothers were killed. The kinsmen of the deceased wanted that the government apply the law of Hammurabi. But the government wanted to settle by giving some compensation. The incident was a symbolic reminder of the historical animosity between the Kunama people and the Eritrean liberation fronts. During the early 1960s the ELF killed a Kunama man from the village of Taikanaba. The Kunama in the different regions resented about the Shambakko incident.

The drive of the state of Eritrea to build Barentu along a master plan has created some problems among the indigenous inhabitants. It should be noted that prior to the Italian colonial period the area that we call Barentu today was uninhabited. The Italian colonial government established the town as a capital of Gash-Setit in 1912. The Kunama and the Nara were the predominant dwellers of the town at that time. The

town did not have a master plan until recently. When the current government decided to have a master plan, it requested the inhabitants of the town to change their residences. The administration gave an ultimatum of three months to the dwellers to move. The inhabitants could not move on time and the administration brought in the military to destroy the houses. The quarters that were affected by the master plan were Awasa, Auda and Tardoni. The Kunama mostly inhabited these areas and one can imagine the kind of resentment that the master plan had caused. Ironically the individuals whose houses were destroyed had to pay about 165 *Nakfa* in order to obtain another piece of land to construct new dwellings. The time that the military was ordered to demolish the houses happen to be during the rainy season. As a result, the affected population could not protect themselves and their belongings from the rains. Finally the dwellers moved to a new area. To remember the mistreatment of the military and the administration, the Kunama call the new quarter *helet kasib*. The name is in Arabic and means “forced quarter.” Government authorities in Barentu do not want people to call the area by this name but the inhabitants continue to call it any way.

The paternalistic character of individuals employed in the different government establishments does not allow any room for communication between the local communities and the state. These individuals are mostly from the Tigrinnya ethnic group. Their ignorance of local languages and customs creates communication problems with the Kunama. The individuals in these institutions reflect condescending attitudes towards the Kunama who in their view are backward requiring the civilizing agency of other more civilized people. They view them as lazy and incapable of using the rich resources of the region.⁸

The legacy of historical animosity in fomenting tensions must not be undermined. There have been animosities between the Kunama and the other ethnic groups. These hostilities took shape during the precolonial period and have been revived during the British rule in Eritrea. During this period the Gash-Setit region experienced a great deal of political turmoil because of the conflicts that occurred between the Kunama and members of Tigrinnya, Tigre, Hedareb and Nara ethnic groups. The underlying cause of the conflicts had to do with the competition over grazing land in the Gash-Setit region. The Tigre, Hedareb and Nara were and still some of them are pastoral often taking their livestock for grazing in Gash-Setit. The hostilities that were created during the 1940s and 1950s continued in the 1960s and 1970s with the emergence of the Eritrean liberation struggle. More recent hostility between the Kunama and Tigrinnya has been revived by the border conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998. The Kunama are accused of once again collaborating with Ethiopia because of their alleged association to an opposition movement. The Ethiopian regime has supported some Eritrean opposition movements including the one that the Kunama are accused of supporting. When I posed the question why the Kunama are accused of collaborating with the Ethiopians to an old Kunama man, he remarked: “...you know these people would blame the Kunama even if natural catastrophes such as famine and locust infestation happen in this country. They do not like us.” Many Kunama would express similar statement concerning their relations with the settler populations in the region.

The demographic processes that have been taking place in the Gash-Setit region in the last ten years have a marginalizing effect on communities such as the Kunama. The situation has more or less similar impact on pastoral societies such as the Tigre and the Hedareb. The Kunama and the pastoral societies have been resenting the expropriation

of land by commercial farmers. When the Ethiopians occupied the area in May 2000, the pastoral societies deliberately grazed their cattle in the farms owned by individuals around Tessenei. The alienation of the societies inhabiting the Gash-Setit area would revive the nativistic kind of resistance movements, which would have destabilizing effects on the nation-building process in the country.

According to Swain (1996:967) those developing countries with multi-ethnic compositions would tend to be more vulnerable to large-scale ethnic conflicts especially if the migrants are identified with a major ethnic group of the country. Myron Weiner (1992:319) defines the term “nativism” as “a claim by a group of people that by virtue of its indigenous character, rooted in historical claims, it has rights upon land, employment, political power and cultural hegemony that are greater than those people who are not indigenous.” This definition applies mainly to dominant ethnic group-based nativism and Weiner mentions as an example, the “sons of the soil” (*bumiputera*) nativist movement of the Malay people of Malaysia. But nativist feelings could develop among indigenous populations who may be numerical minorities in a country such as the Kunama people in Eritrea. The nativism that develops among historically disadvantaged and numerical minority groups, as the case of the Kunama shows, does not claim greater political power and cultural hegemony than other ethnic groups in a multiethnic nation. A central concern of such nativist sentiments is the question of equality and social justice.

Policy issues

In conclusion I would like to briefly discuss some policy issues in this paper. The factors that potential contributing to conflicts in the Gash-Setit district are many and complex. The complexity of the issue needs a concerted effort by several government Ministries. These ministries include the Ministry of Local Government, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Land, Water and the Environment and the Ministry of Energy. One crucial issue that needs to be debated for policy consideration is population movement and settlement, which the state of Eritrea must regulate in order to curb eventual ethnic-based conflicts. The government must work out pragmatic mechanisms of regulating population movement. It should revise the Land Proclamation No. 58/1994 so that the traditional land tenure systems of the various communities can be acknowledged without perpetuating gender and other inequalities.

That the Gash-Setit area is the breadbasket of the country for two factors: availability of cultivable land and fertility of the soil has been already pointed out. Excessive settlement of people in the region can be detrimental to the productive capacity of the area. An alternative is for the state of Eritrea to use the land mainly for a limited number of large-scale agricultural projects producing food and cash crops. Such farms properly managed, could yield the requisite food crops without affecting the overall output of the area. Another way of tackling the settlement issue would be to settle the returnees in the various zones of the country. The settlement of returnees across Eritrea’s different regions would moderate the resentment of the local populations in the Gash-Setit area.

In the Gash-Setit region the individuals who serve in the administration, the police and the courts are not from the local communities. As pointed out earlier this creates communication problems because the individuals do not speak the local languages. The local people often complain about their lack of access to these employment opportunities. To ease local resentment special incentives or benefits must be provided (such as giving local populations priority in employment). Similarly it may require the government to train members from the various ethnic groups as administrators, policemen and judges, among others. The state of Eritrea has been realizing about this need and beginning to train individuals local communities as policemen.

It would require a considerable financial and human resources to tackle these problems. The state of Eritrea needs the assistance of non-government organizations in terms of both financial and expertise. The government has to re-evaluate its relations with NGOs if it is to formulate more flexible policies. But NGOs, no less than the state of Eritrea, need to reflect sensitivity to the concerns of the local communities. The different policies that are formulated by the state should not be considered as eternal. In any institutional context policies are formulated to address certain societal problems. When these policies are implemented and their effectiveness disproved they must be revised and reformulated. Flexibility in policy formulation means simply this. The state of Eritrea must be pragmatic in the way it formulates its policies. Policies that the state has adopted with noble aims but somehow happen to fail to achieve the intended objective must be dropped.

Notes

¹ I have collected the data for writing this paper from the Rockefeller Foundation (ACA program) funded research that I carried out in 1999. I would like to thank the Foundation for the grant it provided. I have written the draft version of this paper at the African Studies Centre of the University of Leiden, The Netherlands where I was a visiting research fellow for three months in 2001. I am grateful to the Centre for the visiting research fellowship.

²The nine different ethnic groups in Eritrea include the Tigrinnya, Tigre, Saho, Kunama, Nara, Bilin, Hedareb, Afar and the Rashayda. Although the elite from the different Moslem societies in Eritrea speak Arabic, only the Rashayda speak it as their mother tongue.

³ Barka is the name of the adjacent region where the Tigre and the Hedareb live. Like in the case of Gash, the name Barka also is derived from the Barka river, which is located in the Barka region.

⁴There are individuals who have been given licenses to collect the firewood from the Gash-Setit region in order to sell to the populations in the towns. These individuals are mostly from the Tigrinnya and to some extent from the Tigre ethnic groups.

⁵ The agricultural development policy of the state of Eritrea favours what Scott (1998) referred to as the ideology of high modernism. This is the belief in the superiority of technology and science. This ideology also favours large commercial farms.

⁶ The strategy of development of the state of Eritrea is quite similar to that followed by France in the nineteenth century. See Weber (1976) for the kind of policies that France introduced during that period. The French state opted for the provision of education, building of roads and the introduction of military conscription for the nation building. The state of Eritrea is similarly committed to building roads, schools and promoting national military service.

⁷ A Tigrinnya policeman killed two Kunama individuals from the village of Taikanaba in the market of Shambakko. The young men were brothers. For a fuller version of the story, see Lussier (1997).

⁸ There is a tendency to believe that compared to other African countries, Eritreans have a higher work ethics. Eritreans who have visited some African nations often talk about the richness in resources of these countries. But they think that the people in these countries are lazy and do not work. Ironically, when the Tigrinnya talk regarding the work ethics among the various ethnic groups within Eritrea, they label non-Tigrinnya communities as lacking work ethics.

References

- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lussier, Dominique. 1997. Local Prohibitions, Memory and Political Judgment among the Kunama an Eritrean Case Study. In *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective*, edited by Katsuyoshi Fukui, Eisei Kurimoto and Masayoshi Shigeta, Kyoto:Japan.
- Nastasi, Vittorio and Pollera Gabriele. 1974. *S.I.A. Estate*. Asmara.
- Naty, Alexander . 2002. Environment, Society and the State in Western Eritrea. *Africa* volume 72, number 4.
- Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing like the State: How certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Swain, Ashok. 1996. Environmental Migration and Conflict Dynamics: Focus on Developing Regions. *Third World Quarterly* volume 17 number15.
- Weber, Eugen. 1976. *Peasants into Frenchmen*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Weiner, Myron. 1992. Peoples and States in a New Ethnic Order. *Third World Quarterly* volume 13 number 2.
- Wolde/Giorghis, Andeberhan. 1993. The human and ecological consequences of the war in Eritrea. In *Conflicts in the Horn of Africa: human and ecological consequences*, edited by Terje Tvedt, 77-84. Uppsala: Reprocentralem HSC.
- Wolf, Eric R. 2001. *Pathways of Power: Building Anthropology of the Modern World*. Berkeley: The University of California Press.