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## The Eritrean People's Liberation Front: A Case Study in the Rhetoric and Practice of African Liberation

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# TROTTER INSTITUTE

The Eritrean People's Liberation Front:  
A Case Study in the Rhetoric and  
Practice of African Liberation

by  
Tsenay Serequeberhan

RESEARCH REPORT

**WILLIAM MONROE TROTTER INSTITUTE**

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Tsenay Serequeberhan

January, 1989

Tsenay Serequeberhan is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Hampshire College and Research Associate at the William Monroe Trotter Institute.

This short Study is dedicated to the women and men who, sacrificing life and limb, fought for and are still fighting for the independence of Eritrea.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The term rhetoric in the vernacular has rather derogatory implications. It usually means insincere or deceptive but eloquent speech. Beyond this negative sense, however, the term also means the art of effectively using words to convey one's views or position (i.e., persuasion). It is in this positive sense that I employ the term in the title of this Study. In doing so, I mean to avoid the word "ideology." My preference for the term "rhetoric," in contradistinction to "ideology," stems from the fact that the latter word has both a negative and an ambiguous sense that cannot be avoided. "Ideology" means false consciousness, and when employed in its adjective form as "ideological," it functions by way of a contrast to or in conjunction with a position supposed "true" in some absolute sense of "truth" as such.

The views of the various African thinkers, which will be systematically explored in this Study, are neither "true" in any absolute sense, nor are they an "ideology" or false consciousness. Rather, they are the self-expression of an open-ended historical process. The works of Fanon, Césaire, Cabral, etc., with which we shall be engaged in formulating the overall perspective of the struggle for African freedom as a discourse aimed at reclaiming history, are the self-expression of this process itself. These works are the artful and effective self-presentation of those engaged in the struggle, i.e., the rhetoric of African liberation.

The basic task of the Study is two fold. We shall first (in Sections II and III) begin by presenting a systematic explication and interpretation of a limited number of political texts, by way of formulating an overall position regarding the perspective and orientation of the anti-colonial liberation struggle in Africa. Based on the interpretation of these texts, the rhetoric of African liberation will be presented as a discourse aimed at reclaiming history. Reclaiming, that is, the history or historicity of the African peoples derailed by colonial conquest.

Following this theoretical exploration, we will then (in Section IV) look at the historical context - the various developments and transformations of the Eritrean Liberation Movement - within which the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (E.P.L.F.) is located and go on to examine the self-reliant orientation that constitutes the E.P.L.F.

The central concern of the Study is to see how the practice of self-reliance originates from within the concrete historical engagement of the E.P.L.F. and is a strategy for liberation in tune with the politico-philosophical aspirations of the struggle for African freedom, i.e., the rhetoric of African liberation. Thus, the polemical thrust of the study is directed against the conventional/convenient and mistaken view that the Eritrean anti-colonial struggle is an Islamic secessionist movement.

The methodological/philosophical orientation of this Study is fundamentally historico-hermeneutical. The texts cited and the authors referred to are meant to be indicative, rather than exhaustive, of the differing views that have been produced by the African anti-colonial struggle.

Given this methodological orientation, the basic aim of the Study is to interpretatively engage a limited number of texts in terms of deciphering the sense of the emancipatory possibility they promise and articulate. Thus, the two basic questions that will orient and direct our interpretation are: What is the conception of liberation or freedom articulated in the texts produced by the African liberation struggle? How does this conception relate to the E.P.L.F. in its formulation of national liberation as "self-reliance?"



# Eritrea

**Location:** 1,000 kilometers on the west coast of the Red Sea. The strategic and political importance of Eritrea lies in the fact that it is located at the southern entrance to the Red Sea.

**Population:** estimated between 3 million and 3.5 million.



## II. THE QUESTION OF AFRICAN FREEDOM

[I]ndependence has been turned into a cage, with people looking at us from outside the bars, sometimes with charitable compassion, sometimes with glee and delight. But my faith will remain unshakable. I know and feel in my heart of hearts that sooner or later my people will rid themselves of all their enemies, foreign and domestic, that they will rise up as one to say no to the shame and degradation of colonialism and regain their dignity in the pure light of day.

Patrice Lumumba  
(from Lumumba's last letter  
to his wife, 1960)

[W]e do not confuse exploitation or exploiters with the colour of men's skins; we do not want any exploitation in our countries, not even by black people.

Amilcar Cabral  
(from "The Nationalist Movements  
of the Portuguese Colonies," 1965)

The Eritrean question is the cause of the independence of a people who refuse and reject any form of annexation, dismemberment or a return to the hated colonialism no matter what type it would be, whatever form it takes or from which direction it comes. . . . This indisputable right to independence to which our country is attached cannot be ignored without creating a new area of strife in East Africa, since the Eritrean people will never accept Ethiopian colonialism.

Ibrahim Sultan  
(from the address to the United  
Nations by the leader of the  
Eritrean Independence Bloc,  
October 1948)

Since 1945 Africa has suffered the loss of approximately 2.5 million dead as a direct result of political strife and conflict.<sup>1</sup> The period of world history that begins with the end of the Second World War has thus been for Africa not a period of relative calm and peace, but rather a period of accelerated war and political turmoil. To be sure, these conflicts have not been futile. By the end of the 1960s

most of African had achieved the status of political independence, and the early 1970s witnessed the end of Portuguese colonialism, the oldest European colonial empire in Africa.<sup>2</sup> To this day, however, wars of liberation in both independent and nonindependent Africa rage on. Grim as this picture may be, it is important to remember that it constitutes the African peoples' struggle to define and establish their freedom.<sup>3</sup> But what kind of freedom are the people of African fighting for? What are they trying to free themselves of and what are they trying to establish?

In partial response to this question, Kwame Nkrumah, a leading pioneer of this struggle, wrote that:

[I]n almost every African state, non-independent and independent guerrilla struggle is being prepared or has been established as the only means to overthrow colonialist, neocolonialist or settler regimes . . . . Guerrilla activities will also continue in many of the independent states, so long as there is no attempt being made to have the means of production owned by the masses of the African people. Unless . . . the independent African states stop paying lip service to socialism and go all out for scientific socialism they are only deferring the guerrilla onset.<sup>4</sup>

In making the above observation, Nkrumah was stating that indeed is the case -- even to this day -- on the Continent as a whole; when he wrote the above, there were 17 major liberation movements active in both independent and non-independent Africa.<sup>5</sup> But by unreservedly employing the abstract and worn out language of Soviet Marxism, the language of "scientific socialism" and "means of production," and by framing the question of African freedom in these terms, Nkrumah occludes the basic cultural-historical character of the question of freedom in Africa.

In other words Nkrumah calls for "scientific socialism" precisely because he thinks it will empower the disinherited peoples of Africa to establish the possibility of their freedom, which he understands as being the control of the "means of production" by the "masses of the African people." However, in posing the



question in this manner, Nkrumah reduces the question of African freedom to an economic issue. The cultural and historical implications of the struggle are left out of view. But a more serious problem is that the Occidental or European framing within which the question as a whole is addressed remains unquestioned and is silently presupposed. Once reduced to an economic issue, the African struggle for freedom is subsumed within the structure of Occidental social and economic concerns. It becomes an Occidental problem in the "tropics," which thus requires European solutions which have been "properly" adopted to the "tropics."

The crucial question Nkrumah fails to ask is what "scientific socialism" or any other conception of freedom conceived in terms of other peoples and histories could mean in the African context. It will not do to transpose European conceptions onto the African situation since such transpositions, precisely because they are transpositions, do not allow for the self-determination of the peoples of Africa.

Any pre-established framework will not reflect the autonomous self-constitution that is necessary if Africa is to be free. As Aimé Césaire correctly observes:

I never thought for a moment that our emancipation could come from the right---that's impossible. . . our liberation placed us on the left, but . . . [we]. . . refused to see the black [African] question as simply a social [economic] question . . . after all we are dealing with the only race which is denied even the notion of humanity.<sup>6</sup> [emphasis added]

According to these eloquent words of the Martiniquian poet, the question of African freedom is not "simply a social question;" rather, it involves the complex project of disclosing the possibility of African freedom from within the African historical horizon and context. Nkrumah's failure consists in his incapacity to think through this crucial dimension of the problem. Thus the specificity and historicity of the African situation escapes him.

The African philosopher Paulin J. Hountondji points out that Nkrumah's thought vacillates between an "early" phase focused on an Africanist orientation and a "later" Marxist-Leninist period. By presenting what he calls a "historicist" reading of Nkrumah's texts, Hountondji argues that the "later" Nkrumah had endorsed the Marxist-Leninist thesis that the struggle in Africa is nothing more than the class struggle of western societies extended to the international arena.<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, Hountondji presents the above as a positive development and thus shares in Nkrumah's failure to grasp the specificity and historicity of the African situation. In fact, Hountondji disparages the earlier works of Nkrumah precisely because they intend -- no matter how inadequately--to think African problems from an African perspective. For Hountondji,

[It] must not be forgotten that later he [Nkrumah] more and more openly declared his allegiance to scientific socialism, that is to say Marxism-Leninism, though, of course, without in any way repudiating the authentic African cultural tradition.<sup>8</sup>

Such a statement is nothing more than a futile attempt to square the proverbial circle, since to subscribe to Marx's thought, understood as "scientific socialism" or "Marxism-Leninism," one necessarily subscribes to a philosophy of history that places Africa at the bottom of an evolutionary ladder that finds its telos in contemporary Europe. Such a perspective subordinates Africa to Europe and tries to solve African problems by imposing European solutions.

As Gerard Chaliand has observed, scientific socialism has become, in the non-European world, a ruthless formula of "development" that cares very little about freedom or any form of human emancipation.<sup>9</sup> In this context, the term "development" is a code word for the imposition of western ways and attitudes on African societies under the guise of liberation or freedom. To be sure, this Soviet-Marxist approach does nothing more than replace the colonialist (or neo-colonialist)

yoke with the yoke of the commissar armed with "scientific socialism" who tries to replicate in Africa conceptions derived from the European historical experience and, thus, necessarily fails. It fails precisely because it only prolongs and reestablishes European colonialism in a new form.

In what has been said thus far, we have rendered the Soviet interpretation of Marx's thought, namely, scientific socialism ---endorsed by Nkrumah and Hountondji--- problematic and questionable in terms of the question of African freedom. It is, therefore, worthwhile at this point to explore the genesis of this perspective regarding its views on non-European cultures. Such an undertaking is necessary because Marx is the one European philosopher whose thinking --- rendered as scientific socialism --- has directly and/or indirectly, positively and/or negatively, affected concrete developments in Africa and the non-European world as a whole.

\*\*\*

Marx's critique of Hegel, his philosophical mentor, derives its power from its radically immanent nature. It thereby unwittingly accepts certain implicit Hegelian presuppositions. For Hegel, world history --- from which he held Africa was excluded --- is the development of the Idea of freedom as it moves from the Orient to the Occident; in the Asiatic East only one is free, whereas in the movement from the east to the west the Idea of freedom is actualized at various and progressively higher levels until it reaches Germanic Christian Europe where all are free.<sup>10</sup>

In like manner for Marx, in so far as his conception of history is evolutionary and developmental, European culture --- whose flowering in full is to be concretely actualized by the modern European proletariat --- represents the future of the non-European world. This is how Marx puts it:

England [Europe], it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindustan [the non-European world], was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid

in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfill its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia [or Africa]? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England, she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution. Then, whatever bitterness the spectacle of the crumbling of an ancient world may have for our personal feelings, we have the right, in point of history to exclaim with Goethe:

“Should this torture then torment us  
Since it brings us greater pleasure?  
Were not through the rule of Timur  
Souls devoured without measure?”<sup>11</sup>

In the same vein, Frederick Engels, Marx’s life-long friend and later systematizer of Marx’s theoretical legacy, has the following to say about the colonial expansion of Europe in the nineteenth century:

Then there is also the case of the conquest and brutal destruction of the economic resources, by which, in certain circumstances, a whole local or national economic development could formerly be ruined. Nowadays, [the second half of the nineteenth century] such a case usually has the opposite effect, at least among great peoples[colonialist Europe!]: in the long run the vanquished [the Asiatic, African . . . etc.] often gains more economically, politically and morally than the victor.<sup>12</sup>

Although Marx and Engels recognized the devastation consequent on colonial subjugation, they nonetheless saw European expansion as a painful necessity required for the introduction of European (human?) “civilization,” which would then serve as the foundation for the possibility of freedom (the attainment of communism) in the non-European world. European colonialism--- in this scheme of things --- is seen as a painful necessity required to attain a double task in the non-European world: “one destructive, the other regenerating --the annihilation of old Asiatic [African] society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia [Africa].”<sup>13</sup>

In other words, for Marx and Engels the question is: “Can mankind fulfill its destiny” without the colonial Europeanization of the non-European world? The affirmative answer presupposed by this rhetorical question posits the “destiny of mankind” as basically singular and European and then goes on to endorse European



expansion as the fulfillment of this "destiny!" But does "mankind" as a whole have a singular "destiny," European or otherwise?

Scientific socialism as a perspective informed by this "destiny," understood as the "laying of the material foundation of Western society" in the non-European world, can object to European colonialism only in terms of the economic exploitation of the subjugated territories. The destruction of non-European cultures and histories and the material and cultural Europeanization of the non-European world (Africa) is something that such a perspective would have to welcome as an indirect benefit of the dialectic of European colonialism.

The point at issue in what has been said thus far is not whether Marx and Engels presented a correct diagnosis of the European colonialist trends of their time. Rather, what is in question is how their positive endorsement of the world historical function of European colonialism structures the perspective of scientific socialism which – mediated by Stalin and the Russian Revolution – has its source of origin in their work and is embraced by Nkrumah and Hountondji. What is interesting to note is that scientific socialism as a political and a historical perspective fails to even think the possibility that human history might not be a single unitary process. It fails to recognize that European history is not the "transcendental and obligatory" meeting point of all histories as such.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, seen from the perspective of scientific socialism, the struggle for African freedom is basically and strictly an economic question. In other words, the cultural/historical dimensions of the struggle (the effort to disclose and reclaim the African historical experience derailed by European colonialism), which is the central component of the work of thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Amilcar Cabral, etc., does not even come up as a consideration.<sup>15</sup> How then is the African struggle for freedom to be understood?



### III. THE HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL HORIZON OF THE AFRICAN LIBERATION STRUGGLE AS A PROCESS OF RECLAIMING HISTORY

The unfreedom or bondage that the African is struggling against is the specific historical situation in which European colonialism (and indirect domination) has placed both independent and non-independent Africa. To rephrase Chinua Achebe, with the advent of European colonialism "things fell apart."<sup>16</sup> The African's mode of life, his human habitat and ethos---his culture and history ---- were violently displaced by European conquest. European colonial violence negated the historicity of the subjugated African peoples.

Things African were devalued, and the African himself was reduced to slavery or at best to the status of a deformed imitation of European man. He became an assimilado or an évolué, a de-Africanized African.<sup>17</sup> As Césaire has observed, the African was "denied even the notion of humanity," precisely because his humanity was understood as barbarism when "measured" against the European notion of what it means to be human.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the African liberation struggle, as Frantz Fanon pointedly observes in the first chapter of his main work, The Wretched of the Earth, is a violent and uncompromising confrontation with European colonialism. But beyond this initial counter-violence the aim of the struggle is to open up or carve out the political-existential-historical space within which the African can be free. It is the attempt to disclose the conditions within which and the limits out of which the African can exist as a historical being. Indeed, the violent anti-colonial confrontation is itself the first moment of the actual reinstitution of the history of the colonized.<sup>19</sup>

But why is this the case? Precisely because the necessity of violence in the colonial situation arises out of the violent nature of this situation itself. The normal and peaceful existence of the colonizer is grounded on the abnormal and subhuman existence of the colonized. Colonialism establishes in the non-European

world--by violence and destruction--the subordination of indigenous histories and cultures and the dominion of European history and culture. Thus, the first act of freedom that the colonized engages in is the attempt to violently disrupt the peace and tranquility colonialism presupposes and needs to establish in order to subordinate the indigenous cultures and histories.

The human being "enters into society (history) as he begins to form his own projects in consort with others or, put another way, society (history) in the concrete is constituted by a community of projects." But colonialism is precisely the complete negation of the "community of projects" that constitutes the actual historicity of the colonized. The very fact of conquest is taken by the colonizer as a metaphysical proof of the unhistoricity of the subjugated. As Amilcar Cabral points out:

If we do not forget the historical perspective of the major events in the life of humanity, if, while maintaining due respect for all philosophies, we do not forget that the world is the creation of man himself, then colonialism can be considered as the paralysis or deviation or even the halting of the history of one people in favour of the acceleration of the historical development of other peoples.<sup>21</sup>

European colonialism is thus the blatant denial of the historicity or humanity of the colonized African, which serves as its own proof. To the extent, then, that national liberation is the overcoming of the colonialist interruption of the history/culture, of the humanity of the colonized, it is a process of returning "to the source."<sup>22</sup> But what does this mean? Is it the going back to an archaic past? What is the "source" towards which the "return" is directed?

Paralysis, deviation, halting are the terms used by Cabral to describe the African experience of European colonialism. These terms suggest the interruption or blockage of a process whose pattern of unfolding does not precede the actuality of the process itself. For what has been halted is the lived-life (histories/cultures) of the various African communities which, in their totality, constitute the people of

Africa. For Cabral, therefore, the "return to the source" is not a going back to an archaic past. Rather, it is the creative appropriation of the dynamic historicity of the African people, which the anti-colonial struggle institutes in its confrontation with colonialism. The struggle, in other words, is an attempt to return to "our history" in the context of the modern world.<sup>23</sup>

European colonialism creates the situation in which the colonized only passively does time and thus subsists in a history of which he is not a participant. History as the temporality of human existence is lived and actualized in differing culturally specific ways. It is this which colonialism obliterates and in so doing pushes the colonized out of history. The colonized is reduced to the status of an animal with specific life needs, i.e., biological existence.

As Albert Memmi observes, at times even the citizens of free countries feel helpless in the face of the modern machinery of states and governments. They are like pawns in the hands of the politicians, their elected "civil servants." Yet, in principle the citizen is a free member of the body politic. Thus, in spite of their apathy and skepticism the free citizens periodically rise up--e.g., May 1968 France--and "upset the politicians' little calculations." On the other hand, the colonized:

feels neither responsible nor guilty nor skeptical, for he is out of the game. He is in no way a subject of history any more. Of course, he carries its burden, often more cruelly than others, but always as an object. He has forgotten how to participate actively in history and no longer even asks to do so.<sup>24</sup>

So far as he is colonized and remains so the African is nothing more than a thingified entity with specific life needs and functions. He exists, strictly speaking, in the realm of nature and not of history. In order to remember and reenter the realm of history the colonized African has to put his situation as a whole in question. This questioning, furthermore, assumes the character of violent

confrontation precisely because the colonized not only wants to be in the "game" but wants to be the author of the rules as well.

As Ngugi Wa Thiongo has correctly observed, this is so because European colonialism not only exploits the resources of Africa but, more fundamentally, it suppressed the cultures of the subjugated African peoples. Thus, the anti-colonial struggle--to be true to its own objectives--has to be a process of cultural/historical revival.<sup>25</sup> It has to be a process through which the colonized peoples of Africa can again "participate actively in history" and become the "subjects" of their own historical existence.

With the dawn of European domination the fiber of African society and life "fell apart." As Basil Davidson points out:

The colonial period, in European mythology, was supposed to have effected that particular transition [from pre-colonial to modern society]. Generally however, it did nothing of the kind. Historically. . . the colonial period was a hiatus, a standstill, an interlude when African history was stopped or was forced to become, for that period, a part of European history.<sup>26</sup>

The colonial era is thus not the epoch of the spread of civilization (Hegel, Marx), but the epoch in which the European mode of life was forced on the planet as a whole. In regards to African, it is the period in which the African historical experience was suppressed, and Africa was forced to become the negative underbelly of European historical development. As Davidson further observes, colonialism was justified by a "whole range of myths about a supposed White superiority."<sup>27</sup> To be sure, European colonial consciousness itself was under the spell of the myths it used to justify its colonial expansion. In other words, these myths of "white superiority" were not merely cynical justifications of colonial conquest. Rather, they were the self-delusion and self-expression of a culture that believed itself to be the true manifestation of human life as such. During the period of colonial rule,



furthermore, these self-deluding myths were also accepted and shared by Europeanized Africans.

To break or interrupt a history is not to stop it in any absolute terms (that would be genocide), but to institute a differing order of historicity, i.e., the history of Europe in Africa. Indeed, this is how the Europeanized African understands "his" history, the process of his emergence from "barbarism" to "civilization." This interlude instituted in the consciousness and the actual life of a segment of those it subjugated (the urbanized "educated" African) the devaluation of all things African. The rural mass, on the other hand, was relegated to an impotent history displaced by the contemporary actuality of colonial domination. As Davidson recounts:

In 1901 a number of Angolans living in Lisbon published a protest against Portuguese misrule of their country. Portugal had conquered Angola centuries earlier, they charged, but done nothing for the people's welfare. "The people remain brutalized, as in their former state," and such neglect was an "outrage against civilization." The history of the next decades would have harsher things to say about African brutality, as well as European. But it would also call in question the smoothly borrowed assumptions of the social hybrids about the opposition of "European civilization" to "African barbarism."<sup>28</sup>

These "social hybrids" (Europeanized Africans) are concerned with the destitution of the native from a strictly European perspective. Portugal's (Europe's) "misrule" of the colonies is an "outrage against civilization," it is an offense against the Idea (Hegel), a disgrace to European civility! That it is legitimate for Europe to have colonies or that Europe is the center and source of all culture and civilization as such is not questioned. What is questioned is the failure to keep the "promise" of civilization. As Memmi observes:

[T]he colonized's liberation must be carried out through a recovery of self and of autonomous dignity. Attempts at imitating the colonizer required self-denial; the colonizer's rejection is the indispensable prelude to self-discovery.<sup>29</sup>

The struggle for African liberation is, therefore, nothing less than the process of “self-discovery” from within the context of the modern world. It is not an attempt to undo the effects of European colonialism--a futile attempt in any case--but rather an effort to go beyond them. It is an attempt to overcome not only the material and physical presence of colonialism, but more importantly, it is an attempt to overcome the violent interruption of African historical existence instituted in the culture and consciousness of the colonized.

Europe experienced the dawn of the modern age as the Age of Enlightenment. In the words of Immanuel Kant, this period of European history was understood as the age in which “man’s release from his self-incurrent tutelage” was actualized. A century later Africa experienced its entry into the modern European world, not as liberation or enlightenment, but as the painful process of colonial subjugation, from which it still suffers. As Fanon so vividly puts it:

The poverty of the people, national oppression, and the inhibition of culture are one and the same thing. After a century of colonial domination we find a culture which is rigid in the extreme, or rather what we find are the dregs of culture. . . . The withering away of the reality of the nation and the death pangs of the national culture are linked to each other in mutual dependence. This is why it is of capital importance to follow the evolution of these relations during the struggle for national freedom.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the struggle for African freedom is a holistic project aimed at reinstating not only the economic but the historical, political, and cultural actuality of the colonized. It is the effort to reclaim the historicity of the African peoples derailed by colonial conquest. But what does this mean?

In the last recorded message of his short but heroic political career, Patrice Lumumba had the following to say regarding the question of liberation in Africa:

Freedom is the ideal for which in all times down through the centuries, men have fought and died. . . . All people have had to fight for their freedom. This was the case for the nationalists who headed the French, Belgian, Russian, and other revolutions. . . . I remind you here of the Declaration of Independence

adopted by the Congress of the United States . . . which proclaimed the . . . liberation from the British yoke.<sup>31</sup>

For Lumumba the question of freedom is not peculiar to Africa; it is a question with which “all people” within the specificity of their culture and history have had to come to terms. Thus the question of freedom in Africa is not understood as an effort to institutionalize European values and conceptions. To be sure, Lumumba is an admirer of the European revolutions, since in their successes he sees the possibility of a radical transformation in Africa. In calling attention to the fact that the struggle for freedom has moved men to action “through the centuries,” Lumumba means only to indicate that, likewise, it is incumbent on the peoples of Africa to establish their freedom and self-determination from within their own social and historical space. As Lumumba observes:

We are Africans and wish to remain so. We have our . . . traditions which are as noble as those of other nations.<sup>32</sup>

In making a similar observation, Fanon remarks that:

[The] concrete problem we find ourselves up against is not that of a choice, cost what it may, between socialism and capitalism as they have been defined by men of other continents and other ages.<sup>33</sup> [emphasis added]

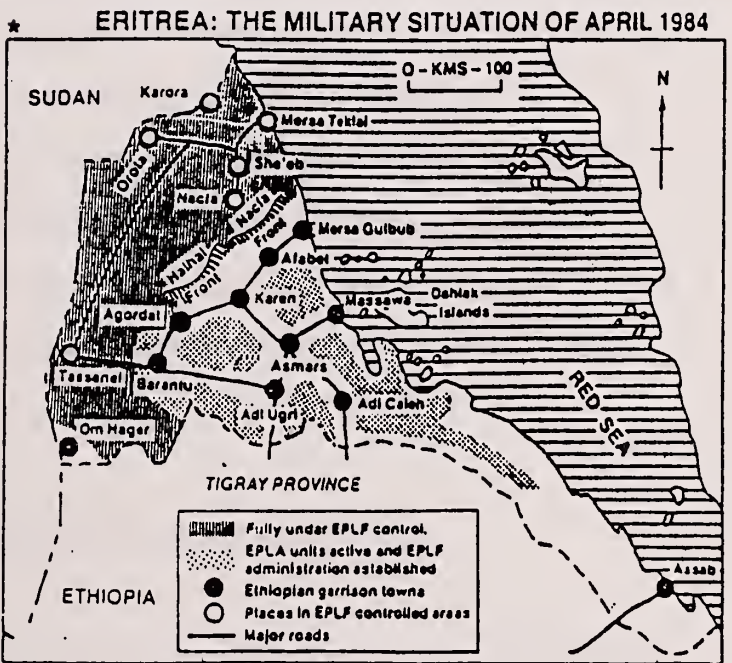
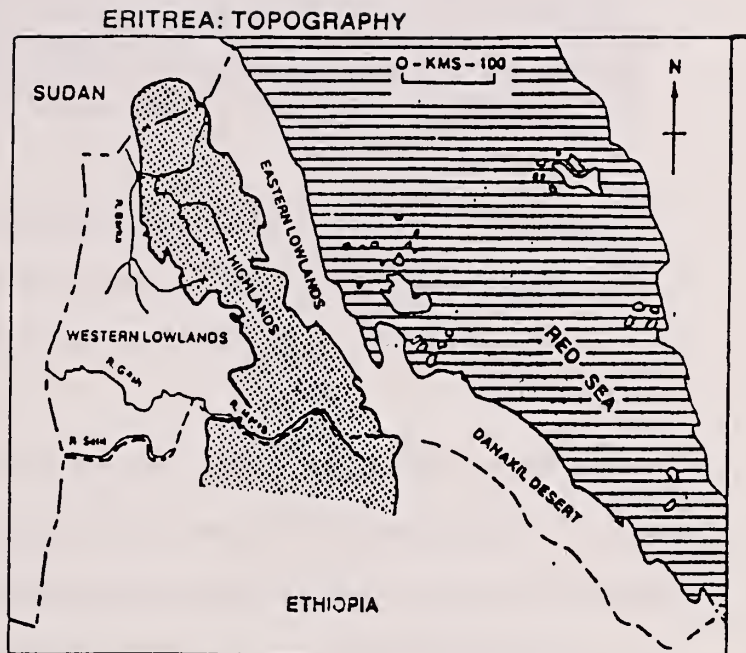
The struggle for African liberation is thus not concerned with choosing from pre-established conceptions of freedom. Rather, it involves the effort to think through the possibility of establishing a mode of life that goes beyond the confines of modern European society, be it capitalist or socialist. It is the effort to fashion out of the African anti-colonial struggle a future that both learns from and transcends, appropriates and negates the European dominated present. It is, in short, an effort aimed at reclaiming history. As Césaire categorically affirms:

Once again, I systematically defend our old Negro civilizations: they were courteous civilizations.



On March 17-18, 1988 in a battle that lasted 48 hours the E.P.L.F. ousted the Ethiopian colonial troops from the town of Afabet. Following this defeat the Ethiopians evacuated the towns of Tessenei (which had been recaptured), Barentu, Agordat and retreated to Keren. Keren, the second largest Eritrean city, is presently encircled by the E.P.L.F. Since 1984 the military Ertustion has radically been transformed in favor of the Eritrean resistance.

(For recent accounts of the situation in Eritrea see, The New York Times, August 21, 23, 25, 1988.)



Source: J Firebrace and S. Holland, Eritrea: Never Kneel Down (The Red Sea Press, 1985), p. 14.



So the real problem, you say, is to return to them. No, I repeat. We are not men for whom it is a question of "either-or." For us, the problem is not to make a utopian and sterile attempt to repeat the past, but to go beyond. It is not a dead society that we want to revive. We leave that to those who go in for exoticism. Nor is it the present colonial society that we wish to prolong, the most putrid carrion that ever rotted under the sun. It is a new society that we must create, with the help of all our brother slaves, a society rich with all the productive power of modern times, warm with all the fraternity of olden days.<sup>34</sup>

In short, to create the possibility of its freedom, Africa has to reclaim its historicity within the context of the modern world of which it is presently a dependent part, thereby negating its subservient position by disclosing and establishing the conditions of its own free existence.<sup>35</sup>

The struggle for liberation in Africa is, then, initially a negative confrontation with European domination and its leftovers. But, more fundamentally, it is -- as we have seen by orchestrating themes from the major figures produced by this struggle -- a struggle to articulate a new mode of life from within the African historical horizon. It is an attempt to reclaim the historical existence of the African that was devastated and covered over by European conquest and domination.

Thus far, following on our genetic critique of scientific socialism, we have articulated the theoretical position that the rhetoric of African liberation is fundamentally a discourse aimed at reclaiming history. We are now in a position to concretely assess the practice of African liberation as undertaken by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front.

#### **IV. THE ERITREAN PEOPLE'S LIBERATION FRONT**

In a recent interview given to a fact finding mission led by Stuart Holland (the British Labour Party's Shadow Minister for Overseas Development) and James Firebrace (War on Want's Programme Officer for the Horn of Africa), Isseyas Afeworki, a founding member of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (E.P.L.F.) and

the newly elected General Secretary of the Front, in answering a question regarding the character of the Front states that, "I think the E.P.L.F. is an expression of the aspirations of our people."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the E.P.L.F. is a direct product of the dynamics of Eritrean history. It is furthermore the embodiment of the "aspirations" of the Eritrean people, the conditions within which the African peoples of Eritrea can concretely affect and direct the possibilities of their own history.

In order to grasp what this means and how it relates to what has been said thus far regarding the struggle for African freedom as process of reclaiming history, it is necessary at this point to present a short exposition of Eritrean history and the history of the Eritrean liberation struggle anterior to the formation of the E.P.L.F. Once placed in its proper historical and political context we will then examine the E.P.L.F.'s conception and practice of "self-reliance" which, in the context of the Eritrean struggle, is the process of reclaiming history.

### **The Historical and Political Context: A Short Resume**

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the northeastern part of the Horn of Africa, just as the rest of the Continent, came under European colonial rule. Imperial Italy made her presence felt at the port of Assab in 1885 and four years later, in 1889, established herself in an area of approximately 1119,000 square kilometers and named it Eritrea.<sup>37</sup> The intricate political and historical developments -- both African and European -- that led to the establishment of the Italian colony of Eritrea need not concern us here. For our purposes all we need to note is that, just as in the rest of the Continent, so too in the Horn, the European scramble for Africa constituted and established the modern-day boundaries of Eritrea as a nation state.<sup>38</sup> Thus the indigenous African historical actuality was subdued and the history of Europe in Africa began in the northeastern region of the Horn.

Eritrea had in 1890 no towns whatsoever . . . .Fifty years later Asmara, with 40,000 European and 60,000 or more native inhabitants, was among the leading cities of Africa . . . .Massawa [with 1,000 Europeans and 9,000 natives . . . .Decamere . . . .with 5,000 Europeans . . . .Keren . . . .10,000 people of whom 1,000 were Italians. The names familiar in previous centuries were heard no more. Debarua shrank to nothing, Zazzega remained a plateau village, Harkiko failed to expand.<sup>39</sup>

With the super-imposition of European/Italian colonial society a large segment of the indigenous population was urbanized to fulfill the labour needs of the Italian settlers. To a large extent, this process of urbanization occurred in the temperate highlands of central and southern Eritrea since these were the areas climatically ideal for European settlement. But beyond the highlands, the Italian colonial apparatus established itself throughout the occupied territory . The Italians engaged in consolidating their hold on Eritrea, "equip[ping] it as a base for further African conquest" and expansion southward.<sup>40</sup> Thus, around the newly established centers of European concentration an interconnected system of communications was developed, primary extracting industries and manufacturing centers.

Economic development was based on a planned system of communications. These comprised a thorough network of trunk and secondary roads, a mountain railway linking Massawa with the plateau and the western plains and an extensive telegraphic and postal organization. . . .Italian officials and representatives of Italian private enterprise assiduously explored every possible field of economic development. . . .An ambitious agricultural project based on an elaborate system of irrigation was initiated on the sparsely populated western frontiers . . . efforts to produce coffee were begun on the northern slopes of the plateau. . . forest lands were made to yield considerable quantities of "vegetable ivory " extracted from the "Dom palm" and used for the manufacture of buttons. . . .As the result of scientific research and the setting up of a superb vaccine institute. . . herds increased, and a reasonable export of hides, skins and tinned meats was realized. Fisheries and salt works were developed at Massawa and Assab. Gold was mined with varying success on the plateau and in the western plains. And as a result of these various enterprises. . . European townships. . . sprang up in various parts of the territory and within them secondary industries took root.<sup>41</sup>

In undertaking the infrastructural transformation of Eritrea, Italian colonial capital carved out an urban economy integrated within itself and dependent on the expansionist needs of Italy. Thus, as the Fabian Colonial Bureau put it:



Whatever else may be said it is clear that Italian rule has molded Eritrea into an economic unit. By creating an elaborate network of communications centered in Asmara, and by creating an economy related to Asmara's central position and its port at Massawa, the Italians economically unified Eritrea.<sup>42</sup>

To be sure, the infrastructural developments that economically tied Eritrea into a politico-economic unit were undertaken "solely in terms of a European Eritrea."<sup>43</sup> In contrast to the above radical transformation, the "most striking characteristic of Italian native policy was its conservatism."<sup>44</sup> The "Italians took pains to shackle native society with its own most backward customary concepts," in effect freezing the indigenous culture, "isolating the Eritrean from any progressive influence to ensure the indefinite continuance of Italian rule."<sup>45</sup> Along with the development of the settler colonial society, the indigenous culture was framed into a situation of isolation and stagnation. Thus "[j]ust like 'British' Kenya, 'Belgian' Congo, 'French' Senegal, so was 'Italian' Eritrea created."<sup>46</sup>

In 1941 Italy was defeated by the British in Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea, and thus had to surrender her colonial possessions. From 1941 to 1952 Eritrea came under British administration. In this period the displacement of one European power by another and the economic and political dislocations that ensued created the political climate for Eritrean nationalism. Under the temporary British Military and then Mandate Administration, urban political parties organically linked to the various rural regions of the country were established. The central and uniting demand of these parties was the call for the independence of Eritrea. As an exception to this, the Unionist Party advocated union with Ethiopia and was staffed and funded by the Ethiopian autocracy for this purpose.<sup>47</sup>

For reasons which we need not delve into here, the Eritrean aspiration for independence was not fulfilled. Instead, the Allied Powers, having been unable to resolve the Eritrean question, referred the matter to the United Nations. In 1952, as a compromise between the forces that advocated independence (representing the

vast majority of the Eritrean people) and the Ethiopian backed and funded minority that demanded union with Ethiopia, the United Nations established a United States backed and sponsored Federation between the Ethiopian imperial autocracy and the newly established independent and democratic government of Eritrea. In establishing the Ethio-Eritrean Federation, the U.N. had done so after having constituted an internally independent Eritrean Government modeled on the western systems of democratic rule.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, the Ethio-Eritrean Federation was a compact between a newly established, fragile democracy and a hereditary imperial autocracy. An imperial autocracy to be sure, which was founded in its inception and constituted in its structure on the colonial conquest and subjugation of the Oromo and Somali territories that today constitute Southern, South-Eastern, and South-Western Ethiopia.<sup>49</sup> From the outset, therefore, the Federation was a ploy to frustrate the legitimate Eritrean aspiration for independence. As John Foster Dulles, the then U.S. Secretary of State, put it:

From the point of view of justice, the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic interests of the United States in the Red Sea basin and considerations of security and world peace make it necessary that the country [Eritrea] has to be linked with our ally, Ethiopia.<sup>50</sup>

In short, the Ethio-Eritrean Federation was a U.S.-Ethiopian formula to safeguard western (imperialist) interests in the strategically important southern entrance to the Red Sea.<sup>51</sup>

This half-way "solution" had been accepted, or more accurately the Eritrean Independence Block (the united front of all the pro-independence parties) was forced to accept this "solution," because it was faced with the categorically unacceptable alternative of having the country divided, along religious and regional grounds, between Ethiopia and the Sudan.<sup>52</sup> The Ethiopian imperial

autocracy, on the other hand, accepted the Federation as a first step in its efforts to completely annex Eritrea.<sup>53</sup>

The ten-year period of the Ethio-Eritrean Federation (1952-62) was a period the Ethiopian autocracy used to systematically subvert and undermine the federal pact. In this period the Ethiopian government closed newspapers, banned labour unions, and assassinated or forced into exile prominent Eritrean nationalists. The Eritrean flag, the national emblem, the official Eritrean languages (Tigringia and Arabic), and the democratic political institutions of the Eritrean government were either banned or subverted. The history of these ten years was in 1962 crowned with its highest achievement, the illegal abrogation of the U.N. established Federation and the colonial annexation of Eritrea as Ethiopia's fourteenth province.<sup>54</sup>

Along with the illegal activities of the Ethiopian autocracy, the ten year Federation period saw the acute development of nationalist politics. Out of the pro-independence parties of the British mandate period (which had been banned) arose the Eritrean Liberation Movement (E.L.M.). This was basically a political movement closely affiliated with the Eritrean Labour Syndicates and engaged in systematic forms of civil disobedience intended to express the outrage of the Eritrean people. The Ethiopian autocracy, which under the illogical arrangements of the Federation also acted as the federal authority, responded by violently crushing any form of overt political discontent. Thus, the brutality of Ethiopian actions gradually decimated the E.L.M.<sup>55</sup>

On September 1, 1961, one year prior to colonial annexation, Eritrean nationalists, cognizant of the imminent danger and in order to attract the attention of the United Nations, formed the Eritrean Liberation Front (E.L.F.) and launched the armed struggle for national independence. The Eritrean Liberation Front was thus a direct reaction to Ethiopian colonial aggression. It arose out of the climate of

frustration surrounding the demise of the E.L.M. and as an attempt to attract the United Nation's intervention on behalf of the legitimate rights of the Eritrean people.<sup>56</sup>

Having ensnared the Eritrean people into one of its most illogical and infamous "solutions," the U.N. totally ignored the Eritrean question and the valiant but futile efforts of the E.L.F. The E.L.F., on its part, never developed a positive program of action. It developed into roving bands of armed men who could attack Ethiopian colonial military outposts at will but were incapable of consolidating their strength in any fixed point and mobilizing the populace for a prolonged war of national liberation.<sup>57</sup> Thus, lacking a positive program of its own and having an exiled leadership resident in Arab capitals and attached to the Arab world by religious sympathy and backed by limited political and military assistance, the E.L.F. became tinted with the pan-Arabic and Islamic politics of the region.<sup>58</sup>

Within the Eritrean struggle this external development led to Christian-Muslim animosities. The religious squabbles, which to a large extent had been overcome in the nationalist parties of the British mandate period, were reignited. This external development, furthermore, became a lethal propaganda tool in the hands of the Ethiopian colonialists. It was used to attack and internationally isolate the movement as basically religious in orientation and to alienate the Christian highland population from the struggle. In addition to the above, the E.L.F. lacked a concrete historico-political analysis of the Eritrean situation and a positive program with which to direct and lead the struggle.<sup>59</sup>

It is in this context and against this dismal political and historical situation that between 1969 and 1970 the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (E.P.L.F.) was born. The E.P.L.F. was established as the embodiment of nationalist efforts to overcome the obstacles created by the historically incompetent E.L.F. leadership. In establishing itself, the E.P.L.F. did so by undertaking a radical critique of the history



of the struggle up to that point and historically placed itself in the position of reasserting the nationalist character of the Eritrean Liberation Movement.

Today, the Eritrean struggle for independence, under the leadership of the E.P.L.F, is directed towards not only independence, but more fundamentally it is based on a self-reliant program aimed at the radical transformation of Eritrean society. It is a popular nationalist movement attached to the most oppressed segments of Eritrean society -- peasants, nomads and workers -- engaged in the autonomous self-institution of the historicity of the Eritrean people. It is, in other words, a movement engaged in the process of reclaiming history, i.e. the indigenous historicity of the Eritrean people, displaced since the establishment of Italian colonialism and which still remains displaced under Ethiopian colonial rule.

It is precisely in this sense that, as Isseyas Afeworki puts it, the E.P.L.F. is the embodiment of the "aspirations" of the Eritrean people and, as we shall see, an expression of the African liberation struggle -- as a process of reclaiming history -- within the particular specificity of the Eritrean political and historical situation.

The task we shall now pursue is to give a descriptive account of the activities of the E.P.L.F. Our purpose is not to give an exhaustive historico-sociological analysis but to present a few paradigmatic examples of what a self-reliant perspective means to the E.P.L.F. In so doing we will see how this perspective is in fundamental congruence with the rhetoric of African liberation.

### **The Self-Reliant Struggle of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front**

In 1969-70 a group of Eritrean Liberation Front combatants split and formed the Eritrean People's Liberation Forces (the name was changed after the first Congress of 1977 to Eritrean People's Liberation Front). This historic split was occasioned by the fact that the E.L.F. leadership, which lacked a political perspective as such, had become completely incapable of leading the struggle against Ethiopian colonialism. This development was the expression of the possibility of radical



transformations in the anti-colonial struggle. As we shall see, the birth of the E.P.L.F. involves a great deal more than the mere changing of a name.

“Our Struggle and Its Aims” is the founding document of the E.P.L.F. The original was a hand-written Tigringia manuscript circulated internally and abroad in Xerox in the early seventies (1970-72) by the combatants that split from the E.L.F. in 1969-70. This document has no theoretical pretensions; it is basically a short programmatic statement of the objectives of the Eritrean Independence Movement, which had been derailed by the lack of an adequate political perspective on the part of E.L.F.’s leadership. In 1977 the E.P.L.F. held its first Congress and issued its first National Democratic Program, which, on the whole, reaffirmed the basic positions articulated in its founding document. Thus the importance of “Our Struggle and Its Aims” (from here on referred to as the Document) lies in the fact that it is the germ out of which the conception of national liberation as self-reliance first originates. This Document is the initial expression, within the context of the Eritrean historical situation, of the conception of national liberation as a process of reclaiming history.

The negative background against which the views of the Document are articulated is the catastrophic situation created by the leadership of the E.L.F. from 1961-69 (see the first part of this section). During this period the cause of Eritrean independence suffered extensive losses. Beyond the political impotence that these developments created, they allowed the Ethiopian colonial authorities to utilize the issue of religion against the cause of Eritrean independence, both internally and in the arena of international politics. It is in this context and against this bleak and negative situation that the Document asserts the indigenous origins and orientation of the Eritrean movement.

The authors of “Our Struggle and Its Aims” begin by noting that such a declaration was necessitated by the confusion and lack of information that prevailed both internally and abroad. Against the E.L.F. leadership the Document

asserts that the Eritrean struggle is neither a religious nor a pan-Arab movement. The authors point out that the ethnic and religious diversity of the Eritrean people is a common characteristic shared by most African countries, that beyond ethnicity and religion, the Eritrean people have a common historical experience expressed in its united struggle against foreign domination. Indeed, the struggle is the embodiment of this common history.

Our present struggle against Ethiopian oppressors is nothing more than an extension of our militant Eritrean struggle against foreign oppression. We are sacrificing our lives to free our people from the shackles of Haile Selassie [Emperor of Ethiopia] and his masters [U.S. imperialism], to attain independence for our country and to realize the self-reliant progress of the Eritrean people.<sup>60</sup>

It is the "self-reliant" progress or regeneration of the Eritrean people and not Islam or pan-Arabism that is the moving force of the struggle. While expressing solidarity with other struggling peoples in the world at large and in the region and calling for their support, the Document rejects any assistance or solidarity arising from the deceptions propagated by the E.L.F. leadership. It points out:

[to those] who give aid and support in the name of Christianity or Islam that such aid or support is of no use to us; we do not want it. We want to assure them that they will be only wasting their resources in vain. To those Eritreans who want to serve their personal interests using religion as an instrument, we wish to not only remind them that their opportunism is shameful but that they will also be remembered as criminals in the history of our people and in the eyes of the world.<sup>61</sup>

The Document concludes with a seven-point preliminary short summary of its goals and objectives. The immediate goal is the "armed struggle to gain national liberation from Ethiopian oppression." In the international arena the E.P.L.F. allies itself "with all progressive peoples in the world, especially those in Africa, Asia and Latin America," and in opposition to U.S. imperialism and Israeli Zionism. On the domestic front the E.P.L.F. aims to build "a society where no economic exploitation or political oppression of man by man exists" and establish a "prosperous nation

with educational, agricultural and industrial development” based on a “National United Front with no distinction as to religion, ethnic affiliation or sex.”<sup>62</sup>

The Document articulates the indigenous character of the Eritrean movement and the fundamental necessity of a self-reliant orientation. To be sure, the term self-reliance occurs but once in the Document as a whole. But insofar as the Document is itself an affront to the external politico-religious impositions that provoked the birth of the E.P.L.F., it is infused with the need for a self-reliant orientation. In being thus oriented towards self-reliance, the Document moves within the general framework of the rhetoric of African liberation as articulated in Section III of this Study.<sup>63</sup>

What needs to be noted, in terms of what has been said thus far, is that the notion of self-reliance does not originate from some a priori theoretical scheme. Rather, it arises out of the concrete situation in which the Eritrean Liberation Movement found itself in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The notion of self-reliance is the embodiment of a holistic perspective that views national liberation as the restoration of the historical existence of a people. In other words, self-reliance and independence are not two things apart.

The historical eventuations that we summarized in the first part of this section, and more specifically the period starting from the British Mandate Authority up to and including the period in which the E.L.F. was the dominant and only force in the Eritrean battlefield (1969-70), and the historical possibilities and disappointments of this era are the direct negative historical antecedents of the E.P.L.F.’s policy of self-reliance.<sup>64</sup> Thus, self-reliance as a policy originates in the recognition that the central failure and weakness of the E.L.F. was its dependence on all levels on foreign powers. Self-reliance arose out of the recognition that “formal” independence, when it is achieved, has to be grounded in the concrete involvement of the liberated people in the possibilities of its history. Independence, in order to have

any meaning for those who are to be independent, must be the actualization of the hitherto suppressed potentials and historical possibilities of the colonized. This then is the end which the E.P.L.F.'s policy of self-reliance seeks to attain.

What we need to do next is to look at how this policy is actualized in the practice of the E.P.L.F., both in its relations with the population that inhabits the areas it controls and in regards to the politico-economic-social infrastructure it has established in the liberated zones under its control.

In a 1983 document, "The Experiences of the E.P.L.F. in Pursuing the Policy of Self-Reliance on the Economic Field," the Front states that:

The pursuance of a policy of self-reliance is essential for the total independence and liberation of a society. Politically, it is the only means to complete freedom. Economically, it is likewise the only means. . . that enables a people to develop their economic potential depending on their own material and human resources. Socially, it is an essential liberating process, emphasizing as it does working cooperatively and collectively to satisfy your own needs. Dependence breeds subservience and lack of self-confidence. Freedom from dependence enhances a people's independence of thinking, innovativeness, perseverance and pride in work and struggle. In pursuing a policy of self-reliance, these attitudes permeate and accelerate the development of every aspect. . . in the process of building a developed socialist society.<sup>65</sup>

The statement quoted above appears on the first page of a document on economics. The concerns it expresses, however, are not merely economic concerns in the strict sense. Rather, self-reliance in economics is organically linked to the socio-political context in which such a development can occur. The possibility of self-reliance in the political and economic sphere, furthermore, is directly linked to the fact that such a policy "enhances a people's independence of thinking, innovativeness, perseverance and pride in work and struggle." Economic self-reliance is thus possible only to the extent that the concrete situation for unleashing the potentials and capabilities of a people is created. The "process of building a developed socialist society" refers to the concrete transformation of the adverse



conditions and relations of existence that hamper the creativity and inventiveness of the colonized.

In terms of economics this means transforming the oppressive relations of production that hamper the productivity of the peasantry. It means enacting a radical restructuring of the established system of land tenure and agricultural production. In other words, transforming the conditions of existence of the peasant population. Such concrete transformational undertakings, in order to be effective, must directly involve the active and spirited political participation of the populace it will affect.

[C]hanges in the traditional system of land tenure affecting landlord-tenant relations, the relations of groups with privileged access to land, with groups with limited rights, as well as the accession of women to land, have been effectuated by the rural masses themselves through. . . the different peasant associations. . . organized and led by the E.P.L. F.<sup>66</sup>

In areas under its control in which some relative tranquility from the war has been established, the Front acts as a catalyst for change. Through the peasant associations it has established, it undertakes a sustained process of education regarding the question of land. Once this preliminary effort has been undertaken, the Front encourages the raising of the question of land and its redistribution in the local village assembly. The Front only acts as a guarantor of the local and legitimate demands that are raised by the impoverished peasantry. Not only is land redistributed but, in the process, the legitimacy of the local village assembly---the political voice of the village---is tested in terms of the politico-economic demands of the local population. Thus, in the process of enacting an economic reform the social and political actuality of the region affected is revitalized.<sup>67</sup>

This concrete revitalization of the indigenous populace in terms of its own life needs is what creates the context in which national liberation becomes a process of reclaiming the historicity of the colonized. This process overcomes the dichotomy of every day life and history instituted by colonial conquest. It does so by infusing

the history of the colonized with the problems and concerns of their own everyday life. The indigenous people had thus far been subordinate elements in the history of colonialism; they now become the subjects of their own historical existence.

National liberation in this context is not confined to a few thousand armed men in the mountains but becomes a project of historical self-institution, i.e., a process of reclaiming history. In addition to the above, self-reliance as a political strategy affords the colonized their own independence of action in the context of international politics. This is particularly true of the political and historical situation of Eritrea.

Unlike most liberation movements and because of the superpower politics of the contemporary world-- the opportunistic Soviet support of the Ethiopian military-colonial government--the Eritrean struggle enjoys very little, if any, material support from the international community. This is the case in spite of the fact that the United Nations is directly implicated in the present plight of the Eritrean people.<sup>68</sup> Now, in the absence of external support, depending on an impoverished people means creating the conditions in which they can be depended on. In the context of isolation, this can only be attained if the struggle depends on the colonized while simultaneously assisting them in improving their daily conditions of existence.

Throughout the liberated territories it controls (85% of the Eritrean countryside) the E.P.L.F. administers a whole network of institutions that both serve the military needs of the Front and fulfill the basic necessities of the civilian population that inhabits these areas. The heart of this infrastructural network is located in the mountainous northern Sahel province. Different regions of this province have, at different times, served as the main and central base area of the Front. Presently the deep gorges, narrow valleys, and steep mountain chains of the Orotta region (located northwest of Nacfa) are fulfilling this purpose.

From its inception the E.P.L.F. had been totally dependent on captured weapons. This was a result of the Front's own political choice (self-reliance) and the lack of adequate support from the outside world. Hence, in order to maintain its military capabilities, the Front developed a cluster of repair shops. In 1975, by consolidating the various workshops that had arisen to satisfy specific needs, the E.P.L.F. established the Manufacturing Commission. This commission is presently subdivided into eight subcommissions: metal works, wood works, leather works, textile works, plastic shoes, female sanitary towels, and the food processing/canning commission.<sup>69</sup> Each commission is constituted by a small- or medium-sized factory of the product it names. The structures that house these factories are built into the surrounding hills and mountains and camouflaged with the local vegetation.

The Orotta region also accommodates the E.P.L.F.'s main hospital, the Zero Revolution School (with 4,000 students and 150 teachers), the Winna Technical School, the radio and cinematography department, a printing press, and a whole cluster of mechanics shops. In addition to the above the Agricultural Department runs an experimental farming station at Nacfa along with a school for training agricultural cadres.

It should be noted that of the above-named institutions, the hospital and the Zero Revolution School are centered in Orotta and spread out from Orotta to the rest of the liberated territories. Throughout the areas it controls, the E.P.L.F. runs a sophisticated health care system, which has a number of regional hospitals, mobile clinics, and an ever increasing number of "bare foot" doctors.<sup>70</sup>

The E.P.L.F. runs a school system that renders service to 25,000 youngsters and 46,000 adults. The basic curriculum of this school system (elementary 1-6 and middle 7-8) is geared towards integrating what the students learn with the needs of the larger society. The emphasis is polytechnical. In terms of the adult population

the emphasis is on eradicating illiteracy in the indigenous languages along with instruction in basic skills.<sup>71</sup>

In a like manner, from the central garage-- which can be more accurately described as a combination metal works/machine shop/gas depository--- a system of major and minor garages and gas stations spread out and render service to the vehicles and trucks of the constantly expanding Department of Transportation. This complicated network of factories and institutions is internally interconnected and linked to the Sudan border and the front lines of military confrontation by a system of mountain roads (basically built by hand), approximately 1,500 to 2,000 kilometers long. These roads, all constructed by Eritrean engineers, are literally dug out of the sides of steep mountains, descending and ascending from deep valleys and narrow gorges, and follow the contours of the harsh landscape. These roads are the life line of the E.P.L.F.'s base area.<sup>72</sup>

The major financial burden for the running of all of the above-named institutions is shouldered by the E.P.L.F.'s Mass Associations of workers, students, women, and peasants, which have their central offices in Sahel but are found throughout Eritrea and in all the exiled Eritrean communities. In the Middle East alone it is estimated that there are more than half a million Eritrean refugees; in addition to these, there are large numbers of Eritreans in Europe, the United States, and Canada. The E.P.L.F. does receive some material and political assistance from Europe especially from the Nordic European countries, support groups, sympathetic political parties, and certain Arab countries. But it is the exiled Eritrean communities throughout the world that render it constant and uninterrupted support. In addition to the above, much of the raw materials, tools, and equipment utilized by the E.P.L.F. run factories--such as the metal works and mechanics shops--are captured in the battlefield; the raw materials and machines that cannot



be secured in this fashion are bought abroad with funds raised by the exiled Eritrean Mass Associations.

The manpower that runs these institutions, both skilled and unskilled, is indigenous. Within the liberated zones, the population is organized into the various Mass Associations (workers, students, women, and peasants). These Associations have yearly congresses in which they periodically elect their representatives, map out tasks to be accomplished for the coming year (in conjunction with the struggle for independence), and reaffirm their commitment to the struggle in their resolutions and the practical translation of these resolutions.

Periodically Eritreans trained abroad in various fields—members of the above-mentioned Mass Associations—join the movement. In so doing, they supply the movement with highly motivated and skilled personnel and simultaneously train others in their specific capabilities. Today (1988), 18 years since the founding of the E.P.L.F. and 27 years since the inception of the Eritrean armed struggle for independence, the E.P.L.F. has a constantly growing number of skilled and technical cadre.<sup>73</sup>

It has to be noted that what we have been detailing thus far (which accounts for only a minor fraction of the E.P.L.F.'s infrastructural layout) was established while simultaneously combatting constant Ethiopian military attacks and aerial bombardment. Since 1974 the E.P.L.F. has repulsed nine mammoth-sized military offensives (on average 70,000 to 90,000 men), lead and directed by Soviet military experts. Under conditions of war, the smooth operation of such an interconnected system of factories and institutions, which serves both military and civilian needs, requires a very high level of organization and discipline. But more fundamentally it requires the spirited and active participation of the population, those within the country and the exiled Eritrean communities world-wide.

Furthermore, this active participation is not only the means by which the E.P.L.F. strives to achieve national independence but it is also and more fundamentally the end and the highest objective of the Eritrean Liberation Movement. It is in this respect that the E.P.L.F. actualizes the basic theme of reclaiming history articulated by the texts produced by the African liberation movement. It empowers the Eritrean people in reclaiming the indigenous historicality suppressed by colonial conquest. For when a people become the active agents of their own existence, it means they have effectively reclaimed their historical being.

In actively engaging the historico-political needs of their native land the E.P.L.F. reclaim the historicality of the Eritrean people by creating the context in which the anti-colonial struggle becomes the daily concern of the colonized. For ultimately self-reliance means precisely this: actualizing the possibilities of one's own history. It is in this sense then that the Eritrean Liberation Movement as embodied in the E.P.L.F. is an integral part of the African struggle for freedom: precisely because it actualizes within a national context (Eritrea) the struggle to reclaim the historicality of the African peoples interrupted by colonial conquest.

A people who actuate their own most possibilities is a people that lives the possibilities inherent in its historicality as a people. As we saw earlier, this is the basic and defining theme expressed in the rhetoric of African liberation.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>(1982, July). What Price the African Soldier? Africa Now, 15. P. 22. I stress "direct" because the figure cited does not take into account those who have died in noncombat situations as a direct result of political turmoil, i.e., famine, exile, collective punishment, etc.
- <sup>2</sup>For a clear assessment of how Portuguese colonialism was more of a European-North American phenomenon, rather than just Portuguese, see: O'Brien, Jay. (1974, May). Portugal in Africa. Month Review, 26. See also: Gibson, Richard. (1972). African Liberation Movements. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press. Part Five.
- <sup>3</sup>By the term "African peoples" I mean to refer to the inhabitants of the continent as a whole minus the white settlers in Azania. I use the term collectively, moreover, not in order to level off the variety and multiplicity that constitutes the inhabitants of the continent, but rather to highlight the common historical experience of European colonialism that since the last quarter of the nineteenth century has imposed on the inhabitants of the continent a shared destiny.
- <sup>4</sup>Nkrumah, Kwame. (1975). Class Struggle in Africa. New York: International Publishers. Pp. 51-53. For a critical, yet sympathetic, assessment of Nkrumah, see: Hountondji, Paulin J. (1983). African Philosophy. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Part Two, Sections 6 and 7.
- <sup>5</sup>Nkrumah. Class Struggle in Africa. Pp. 52-53.
- <sup>6</sup>Cesaire, Aime. (1972). Discourse on Colonialism. New York: Monthly Review Press. Pp. 78-79.
- <sup>7</sup>Hountondji. African Philosophy. Pp. 135-37.
- <sup>8</sup>Ibid. P. 141-42.
- <sup>9</sup>Chaliand, Gerard. (1977). Revolutions in the Third World. New York: The Viking Press. Part Two, Section 6. For a good example of the consequences of Soviet Marxism in Africa, see: Markakis, John. (1975). Garison Socialism: The Case of Etheopia. Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) Reports, 79. Washington, D.C.: MERIP. In this respect, see also: Fenton, James. (1985, November 7). Ethiopia: Victors and Victims. The New York Review of Books, 32 (17).
- <sup>10</sup>For a detailed critical exposition of the Euro-centric presuppositions of Hegel's perspective, see: Serrequeberhan, Tsenay. (Forthcoming). The Idea of Colonialism in Hegel's Philosophy of Right. International Philosophical Quarterly.
- <sup>11</sup>Marx, Karl & Engels, Frederick. (1972). On Colonialism. New York: International Publishers. P. 41.
- <sup>12</sup>Tucker, Robert. (1978). The Marx-Engels Reader. New York: Norton & Co. P. 762.
- <sup>13</sup>Marx & Engels. On Colonialism. P. 81.

- <sup>14</sup>Castoriadis, Cornelius. (1982, Fall). The Greek Polis and the Creation of Democracy. Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal, 9, 2:93. For a critique of Marx's notion of history, see: Axelos, Kostas. (1976). Alienation, Praxis, & Techne in the Thought of Karl Marx. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. Passim.
- <sup>15</sup>In other words, given the orientation of scientific socialism, the imposition of European culture or the Europeanization of Africa is something to be welcomed.
- <sup>16</sup>Achebe, Chinua. (1959). Things Fall Apart. Greenwich, CT: Faucett Premier. In this historical novel, Achebe narrates the systematic destruction of an Ebo village and in so doing gives us a miniature picture of the colossal process of colonialism.
- <sup>17</sup>For assimilado, see: de Andrade, Mario. (1979). Biographical Notes in Unity and Struggle. Monthly Review Press. P. xxiii. For evolue, see: Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1972). Introduction to Lumumba Speaks. Boston: Little, Brown & Company. P. 8.
- <sup>18</sup>Eisely, Loren. (1961). Darwin's Century. Garden City, NJ: Anchor Books. Pp. 259-66.
- <sup>19</sup>Fanon, Frantz. (1963). The Wretched of the Earth. New York: Grove Press. P. 36-37.
- <sup>20</sup>Blanchette, Oliva. (1973). For a Fundamental Social Ethic. New York: Philosophical Library. P. 28.
- <sup>21</sup>Cabral, Amilcar. (1969). Revolution in Guinea: Selected Texts. New York: Monthly Review Press. P. 76.
- <sup>22</sup>In this regard, see the sections entitled "National Liberation and Culture" and "Identity and Dignity in the Context of the National Liberation Struggle" in: Cabral, Amilcar. (1973). Return to the Source: Selected Speeches. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- <sup>23</sup>Cabral. Revolution in Guinea. P. 68. In this respect, see also: Davidson, Basil. (1980). Cross Roads in Africa. Nottingham, England: Spokesman Press. P. 31. See also: Fanon. Wretched of the Earth. Section entitled "Spontaneity: Its Strength and Weakness."
- <sup>24</sup>Memmi, Albert. (1965). The Colonizer and the Colonized. Boston: Beacon Press. P. 92.
- <sup>25</sup>Thiong'o, Ngugi Wa. (1983). Homecoming. Chicago: Lawrence Hill and Co. See Part I.
- <sup>26</sup>Davidson. Cross Roads in Africa. P. 47
- <sup>27</sup>Davidson, Basil. (1983). Modern Africa. White Plains, NY: Longman. P. 4.
- <sup>28</sup>Davidson, Basil. (1978). Africa in Modern History. New York: Penguin Books. P. 43.
- <sup>29</sup>Memmi. The Colonizer and the Colonized. P. 128.



- 30Fanon. The Wretched of the Earth. P. 238.
- 31Lierde, J.V. (Ed.). (1972). Lumumba Speaks: The Speeches and Writings of Patrice Lumumba. H.R. Lane, Translator. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. P. 426-27.
- 32Ibid. P. 429.
- 33Fanon. The Wretched of the Earth. P. 99.
- 34Cesaire, Aime. (1972). Discourse on Colonialism. New York: Monthly Review Press. P. 31.
- 35In this respect, see: Cabral. Identity and Dignity in the Context of the National Liberation Struggle. Return to the Source.
- 36Firebrace, James & Holland, Stuart. (1985). Eritrea: Never Kneel Down. Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press. P. 127.
- 37Selassie, Bereket Habte. (1980). Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa. New York: Monthly Review Press. P. 48.
- 38Ibid. P. 52.
- 39Longrig, S.H. (1945). A Short History of Eritrea. London: Oxford Clarendon Press. P. 138.
- 40Ibid. P. 132.
- 41Gray, J.C. & Silberman, L. (1948). The Fate of Italy's Colonies: A Report to the Fabian Colonial Bureau with Contributions by An Observer in Eritrea. London: Fabian Publications. Pp. 21-22.
- 42Ibid. P. 32.
- 43Ibid. P. 22.
- 44Ibid. P. 19.
- 45Ibid. P. 21.
- 46(1978, July). Vanguard, 3, 3:13. (Official monthly organ of the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front).
- 47For a detailed discussion of the period see: Ellington, Lloyd. (1977). The Emergence of Political Parties in Eritrea, 1941-1952. Journal of African History, Vol. XVLLL, 2.
- 48For a detailed discussion of this period see: Ellington, Lloyd. (1978, April 13-16). The Origins and Development of the Eritrean Liberation Movement. In Robert L. Hess, (Ed.), Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Session B. Chicago. In this regard see also: U.S. Department of State Division of African Affairs, Incoming Telegram No. 171, August 19, 1949, in which among other things it is stated that the "independence bloc commands 75 percent of

Eritrea" as of August 10, 1949. Reprinted in (1986, Summer), Journal of Eritrean Studies, Vol. 1, 1:70-71.

<sup>49</sup>Regarding the expansionist character of the Ethiopian state see: Hiwet, Addis. (1975). Ethiopia From Autocracy to Revolution. (Review of African Political Economy.) Chapter One. Regarding the expansionist character of Ethiopian foreign policy see: Pankhurst, Richard. (1978, October/December). Decolonization of Ethiopia, 1940-1955. Horn of Africa, 1(4).

<sup>50</sup>As quoted by Bereket H. Selassie, Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa, p. 58. For a revealing indication of the U.S. interest in Eritrea see: Southard, Addison E. (American consul at Aden, Arabia). (1920). Eritrea, A Red Sea Italian Colony of Increasing Interest to American Commerce. (Special Consular Reports No. 82). Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.

<sup>51</sup>For a detailed discussion of the power politics surrounding the Eritrean question, see: Fessehazion, Tekie. (1983). The International Dimensions of the Eritrean Question. Horn of Africa, 6(2).

<sup>52</sup>Selassie. Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa. P. 56.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid. Pp. 58-63.

<sup>54</sup>Ellington. The Origins and Development of the Eritrean Liberation Movement. Pp. 613-19.

<sup>55</sup>Selassie. Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa. Pp. 61-62.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid. Pp. 63-66.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid. Pp. 64-65.

<sup>58</sup>Ellington. The Origins and Development of the Eritrean Liberation Movement. P. 621.

<sup>59</sup>Selassie. Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa. P. 64.

<sup>60</sup>(1973, March). Our Struggle and Its Aims. Liberation, 2 (3). (Published monthly by Eritreans for Liberation in North America). For a discussion of this and related texts see: Pool, David. (1983). Eritrean Nationalism. In I.M. Lew, Ed., Nationalism and Self-Determination in the Horn of Africa. London: Ithaca Press. See also: Gebre-Medhin, Jordan. (1984, September). Nationalism, Peasant Politics and the Emergence of a Vanguard Front in Eritrea. Review of African Political Economy, 30.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid. P. 20.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid. P. 23.

<sup>63</sup>The basic themes of the Document and the views of the various African thinkers examined in Section III are in congruence on all major points.

<sup>64</sup>Based on discussions with the members of the E.P.L.F. department of research, Himbol Eritrea, June 1988.

- <sup>65</sup>Eritrean People's Liberation Front. (1983). The Experiences of the EPLF in Pursuing the Policy of Self-Reliance on the Economic Front. (Unpublished monograph).
- <sup>66</sup>ibid. P. 8.
- <sup>67</sup>In this regard see: Eritrean People's Liberation Front. (1983). Creating a Popular Economic, Political and Military Base. Section III. (Unpublished monograph). Regarding the character of the E.P.L. F. as a liberation front see: Chaliand, Gerard. (1978, Spring). The Horn of Africa's Dilemma. Foreign Policy, 30.
- <sup>68</sup>For a detailed discussion of this point see: Fissenhatzion, Tekie. The International Dimensions of the Eritrean Question. See also: Selassie. Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa.
- <sup>69</sup>Based on discussions with Niguse Kisha, coresponsible for the E.P.L.F.'s manufacturing commission, Orotta Eritrea, June 1988.
- <sup>70</sup>For a basic overall account of health care in the areas administered by the E.P.L.F. see: Eritrean People's Liberation Front. (1976, October). Serving the Masses on the Medical Front. New York: Eritreans for Liberation in North America. For a recent account of health care in Eritrea see: Kifner, John. (1988, August 21). Rebels in Ethiopia Work to Modernize Eritrea. New York Times.
- <sup>71</sup>Based on discussions with Osman Saleh (Abu Afan), Codirector of the Zero Revolution School and Central Committee member coresponsible for education in liberated Eritrea, June 1988. In this regard see also: Eritrean People's Liberation Front. (1983). Education Under the EPLF. (Unpublished monograph).
- <sup>72</sup>I traveled these roads for three weeks (May 24 through June 12, 1988).
- <sup>73</sup>Unlike most Third World countries Eritrea does not suffer from the lack of technical personnel.