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MM-6 1998  
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## An Excursion to Asmara (via Djibouti, of course)

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia

December 1998

By Marc Michaelson

When I told my Ethiopia-based colleagues of my plans to visit Eritrea in August, I received a host of warnings — “*Why* would you want to go *there*?” “Don’t do *that*!!!” And, of course, echoing the twangy drawl of the old Vermonter in the Pepperidge Farm adverts: “Ya can’t get *thar*’ from *har*’.” One friend even said a fairly final good-bye to me, convinced he would never see me again.

Such is the power of information. Or, perhaps, the power of *misinformation*. The Ethiopia-Eritrea border conflict had created hysteria, suspicion and fear of the “other side” in both Asmara and Addis Ababa, the two country’s capitals. The U.S. Embassy had issued a warning against travel to Eritrea, apparently based on the June 5th bombing of the Asmara airport. Nonessential U.S. government personnel and families had been evacuated in a massive overreaction to the bombing. Despite an air cease-fire (negotiated by President Clinton in mid-June) and military stalemate along the border, the travel warning remained.

And, for those of us who received our news from sources in Addis Ababa, you would think Asmara had deteriorated into chaotic, modern-day Sebastopol or post-war Berlins. Vicious rumors circulated — there was no food in the Eritrean capital; a loaf of bread cost 15 nakfa (\$2); people were starving. To top it off, the place was dangerous; safety and security could not be guaranteed. And, if the fighting resumed, well, forget it — you might as well cash in your chips, the place was bound to spontaneously combust.

In assessing whether or not to go, I went to the U.S. Embassy in Addis, and spoke with a diplomat who had recently traveled to Asmara on official business. I was encouraged. He had returned unscathed and even said it was stable and “a nice place.” Then, I went to the consular section to find out if any Americans coming from Eritrea had been refused re-entry into Ethiopia. The consular officer stared deeply into my eyes and instructed me in a slow but firm tone: “D-O-N’-T G-O.” I politely shrugged off the advice and repeated my question about re-entry. “The situation is VERY sensitive; I don’t think you should go,” she seemed insistent. I gave it one last try, and finally she admitted, “Well.... um.....no....nobody has been refused re-entry YET,” implying that if I’m foolish enough to go, I will certainly be the first. I bowed (an Ethiopian gesture of deference, and a habit I find tough to kick, even when solely in the presence of Americans), said thanks, and slid out the door.

I have to admit, I was scared. I had no idea what to expect and I had no contacts on the Eritrean side to reassure me. The conventional wisdom was that fighting would resume in late September, after the end of the rains, and after Ethiopia had bought enough time to train and mobilize hordes of recruits. I thought it through. If I wanted to get to Eritrea and learn about the conflict from the other side, I had better act fast. If I waited, I might lose the opportu-

nity. I planned my trip — three days in Djibouti and three weeks in Asmara — bought my ticket for Djibouti (tickets to Asmara could no longer be purchased in Addis), and off I went.

## DJIBOUTI: HOTTER THAN HELL, AND WITHOUT THE ACCOMMODATIONS

Djibouti is one of the hottest places on earth — I saw this written somewhere or other. Now that I've been there, I know it's true. Djibouti is the kind of place where three days feels like three months. It is a port city, and the site of the French Legion's outpost in East Africa. The electricity doesn't work more than an hour or so a day, and neither does the water. Accommodation, food and just about everything else is exorbitantly over-priced. The prices are not much less than one would pay in Paris, only this ain't Paris, it's an obscure godforsaken capital perched across the Red Sea from Yemen. And, let's not forget, it's HOT — but not just hot — really really hot... and humid.

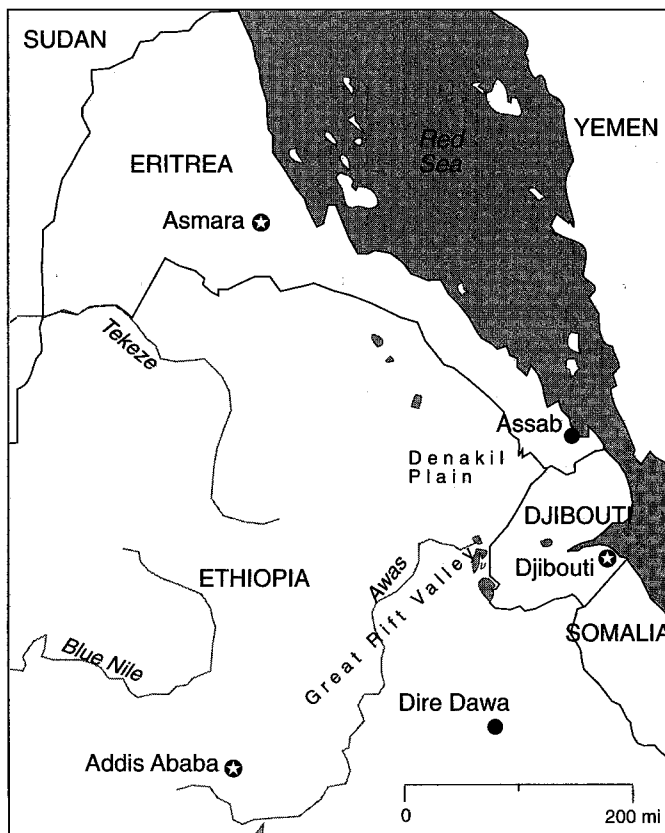
I arrived in the afternoon, checked into the run-down Hotel Ali-Sabieh, where a musty old room can be occupied for the modest fee of \$42 per night. This is a bargain by Djiboutian standards, and I was pleased to find a beat-up old air conditioner vibrating and barking loudly as it spewed lukewarm air into my room.

On the street at 2 p.m., there is not a lot of activity. The extended midday siesta finds people lying on shaded verandahs and in doorways, paralyzed by the heat and the narcotic *khat* (pronounced "chat") Djiboutians chew with a passion. *Khat*-chewing is a national pastime in Djibouti; those who partake lie in a pleasant stupor, rendered contentedly unproductive for most of the afternoon hours.

Not to appear biased, I want to point out at least one redeeming aspect of life in Djibouti: Yemeni-Style Fish. Each evening, once the temperature had dropped to a brisk 95 degrees Fahrenheit, I headed for the market section of town and a local chop house staffed with Ethiopian émigrés, most from the Dire Dawa area (eastern Ethiopia). We spoke in muddled Amharic-French, and I picked one of the fresh catch sitting on ice in the cooler. The cook split it along the center bone, doused it with fiery spices and set it on the grill. It was served with a large, warm Yemeni pita and a garlicky tomato sauce. When people like myself whine about the oppressive living conditions in Djibouti, I always ask them if they've had Yemeni-style fish. Delicious.

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Curiously, Djibouti hosts the Secretariat of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the recently revitalized subregional organization responsible for fostering economic cooperation and peace in the Horn



of Africa. From hopeful expatriates at USAID (United States Agency for International Development) and elsewhere, I had heard IGAD touted as a new force in the region, revitalized with enhanced capacities and the unwavering devotion of its member nations.

I was disappointed. The IGAD Secretariat has some intelligent, very capable staff. It appears well-organized and well-outfitted. However, IGAD's vast potential hasn't yet been activated. Many key staff positions remain unfilled. Intergovernmental projects, many of which seek to build subregional infrastructures like roads and railways, are slowly inching along. And, perhaps of most pressing concern, the conflict-resolution mechanisms are utterly useless.

The revitalization of IGAD in 1996 was led and pushed most vigorously by Ethiopia and Eritrea. Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki possessed bold visions and deep commitments to subregional cooperation. Both believed that subregional peace and security, as well as economic integration, would be critical in forging a more prosperous future for the peoples of their nations. Ironically, it was the border dispute between the two countries that eventually exposed the wholesale impotence of IGAD as an arbiter of conflicts in the Horn.

Dr. Tekeste Ghebray, an Eritrean, is IGAD's Executive Secretary; Dr. Kifle Abraham, an Ethiopian, heads

the Political and Humanitarian Affairs Division.<sup>1</sup> Both are thoughtful, prominent, well-respected diplomats. And both are “insiders,” possessing high-level contacts and influence within their governments. The two could have worked together to launch a strong IGAD peace initiative. However, since the border conflict broke out, Dr. Kinfe has been scarce in Djibouti, having returned to Ethiopia to work with his government on conflict-related issues. The current Chairman of IGAD, Djiboutian President Hassan Gouled Aptidon, did attempt shuttle diplomacy but failed to break the deadlock. Otherwise, IGAD has watched silently from the sidelines as its two greatest proponents, Ethiopia and Eritrea, steadily prepared for war.

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The other Djibouti attraction at this particular time was the port. When the Ethiopian-Eritrean border war broke out, Ethiopia swiftly shifted its primary sea-trade point from Assab (Eritrea) to Djibouti. I was curious to see the port and the impact the increased business has had on local life. While I couldn't enter the port itself, I watched from afar as large ships unloaded hundreds of containers. Throngs of Ethiopians were in town, many of whom had arrived in the preceding few months in search of work. Those with whom I spoke said there were now many more jobs available, and the local economy was booming from the influx. Bars, restaurants, and local market stalls seemed to be crowded and lively.

After three days in Djibouti, I was ready to move on



*Djibouti Port, recent source of an economic “boom” in the small Francophone country*

to Eritrea. The only flight from Djibouti to Asmara was with a Somali-owned private carrier called Dallol Airlines. Later, I was informed by a Canadian diplomat that he is prohibited from flying Dallol since it is not IATA-approved. Details, details. The plane looked vaguely air-worthy — it was a former Aeroflot plane, a throwback to the Soviet Union that later became an Air Tajikistan plane, and having fulfilled its duties there, I assume, was then contracted to Dallol. The crew, led by a disheveled, overweight Air Tajik pilot in a green fatigue t-shirt, hardly inspired confidence. The air in the plane, like the air outside, was brutally hot, and we sat baking on the runway for effect. Once airborne, enjoying the air vent and sipping faux orange juice, I could sense better times ahead.

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF ASMARA: STARRY-EYED IDEALISM

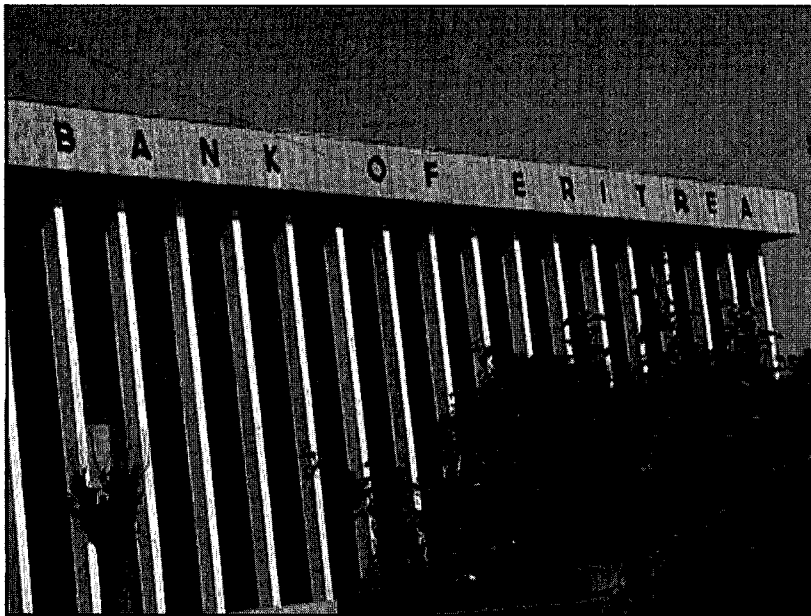
The aftershocks of the Ethiopian bombing of Asmara on June 5th were still rippling as I arrived on July 31st. While the attack itself did little military damage, the exodus of expatriates and the near total absence of tourists have had great impact. The half-empty flight was essentially devoid of foreigners, save myself and a returning Italian diplomat.

The airport resembled that in Addis Ababa, albeit a tad more orderly and a tad less efficient. I visited the currency exchange window to buy some of those controversial crisp new *nakfa* notes.<sup>2</sup> The teller's technology was somehow overly advanced — his shiny new counterfeit-currency detector couldn't verify the validity of my \$100 bill because it was issued way back in 1983. Who am I to complain? 1983 is ancient history here: pre-independent Eritrea. Glancing behind me I noticed a sharply dressed, neatly groomed man working in the glass-encased Tourism Office. He appeared bored and forgotten; he smiled at me hopefully — maybe, just maybe this *ferenji* (foreigner) will come in for a visit. I obliged, seeking a few minutes' advice on hotels, transportation and sights.

He helped me arrange a taxi, which for \$6 proceeded to drive me around town for 45 minutes, showing me several hotels. The driver pulled up to the first hotel, parked on the street, and left the engine running and doors unlocked with all of my valuables in clear view in the back seat. He began walking up the steps to the hotel entrance, entreating me to follow. Pointing nervously back at

<sup>1</sup> Among the key posts that remained vacant as of my July visit were the Chief of the Conflict Prevention, Management, and Resolution Section and the Chief of the Disaster-Management Section, both of which will eventually report to Dr. Kinfe.

<sup>2</sup> Eritrea's new currency, the *nakfa*, was introduced in October 1997. Prior to that time, Eritrea had continued to use Ethiopia's currency, the *birr*, as its official mode of exchange. The introduction of the *nakfa* and the corresponding ruptures in trade relations it triggered, fed the rapid decline of Ethiopian-Eritrean relations that culminated in border war in May 1998.



*Eritrea's national bank, home of the nakfa*

his taxi I said, "But....uh.....you forgot to turn off and lock your car."

He laughed: "This is Asmara." I wasn't convinced. Reluctantly, I left my camera, money, and passport for any bypasser to casually steal, and entered the hotel. The end of this story is easily foretold — the cabby was right — this IS Asmara.

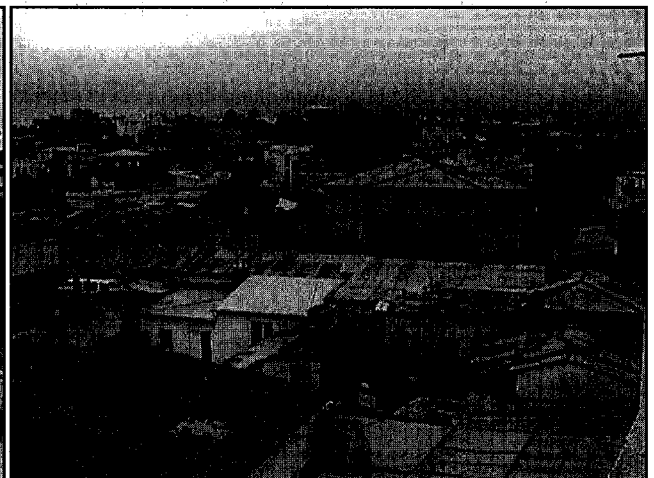
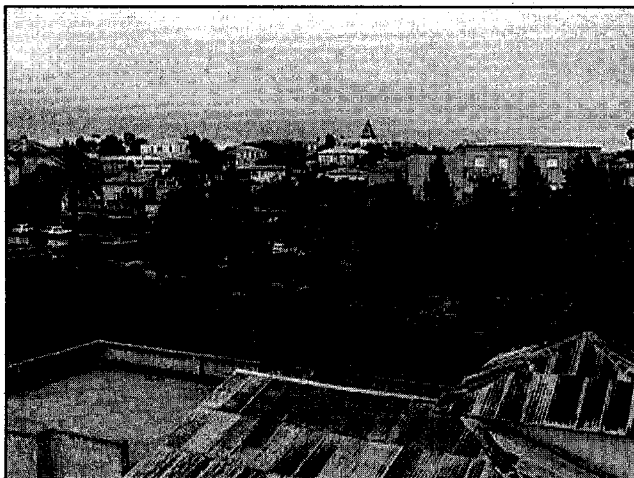
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I had awaited this moment for the past 12 years. I first heard of Eritrea, its independence struggle and corresponding social revolution, as a freshman at Tufts University in 1986. A surgeon from Harvard Medical School presented an evening slide show on the sophisticated Eritrean Public Health Program. We saw pictures of underground hospitals built into the rugged Sahelian mountainside where Eritrean doctors performed open-heart and brain surgery. We heard stories of locally manu-

factured pharmaceuticals, and tales of "barefoot doctors" serving peasants in the countryside. The message was clear — the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) was no ordinary guerrilla movement. This was not going to be the same old pathetic story of African decline — corrupt and repressive leadership, economic stagnation, aid dependency. No, Eritrea would be different, and I was inspired. Over the next two years I worked on an Eritrean political-asylum case and volunteered at Grassroots International, a small Cambridge-based NGO (non-governmental organization) that supported the Eritrean nationalist movement. From those days at Tufts, I obsessively followed Eritrea in the news, and hoped that eventually I would have the chance to visit and see it for myself.

The morning after my arrival, the first words I heard when leaving the hotel were "Buon giorno!" and many of Asmara's older residents tried (unsuccessfully) to engage me in Italian conversation. It was a Saturday, and as I walked around the center of town I was genuinely awestruck. There was no traffic on the main street, no beggars displaying their deformities, no open sewage nor stench. People promenaded along the wide sidewalks, stopping frequently to greet old friends with a smile and three firm knocks on the shoulder, a silent greeting born in the bush during the liberation struggle. Others sat and chatted at simple outdoor cafes, drinking tea or *machiato* (espresso and milk), and watching the world go by. Even the weather was glorious, the bright sun and cool breeze balancing the temperature in perfect equilibrium.

Asmara's center is immaculate, and has the architectural feel of a small Italian town. The main street cutting through the center is Liberty Avenue, a wide, palm-lined

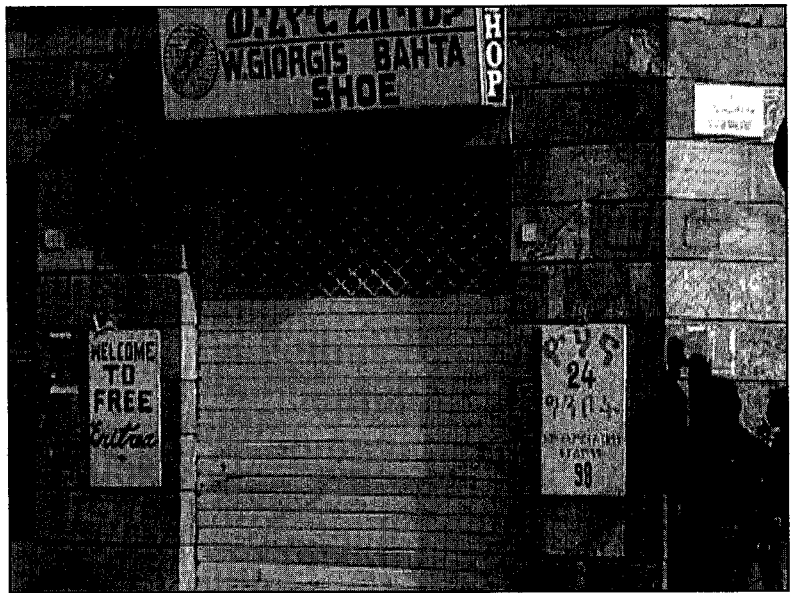


*Two views of the Asmara skyline from atop the Sheghay hotel*

drive essentially devoid of traffic. The government has closed the street to all private cars; only a trickle of public buses and taxis are allowed on the city's main thoroughfare.

There is a special energy in this part of town, linked to the continuing euphoria of independence. Most storefront windows are painted with a variation of "*Congratulations May 24th, 7 years of victory!*" — referring to the fall of the leftist Derg dictatorship in 1991, the moment of Eritrean liberation.<sup>3</sup> Ex-soldiers limp across the street with prostheses or roll in wheelchairs without a hint of shame — they are heroes in this nascent country and evince pride in their collective accomplishments, not sorrow for their personal physical loss. One sign across from the coffee house at which I sat proclaimed "*Welcome to Free Eritrea*". The exuberance of freedom painfully attained is still omnipresent.

These glorified initial impressions are not uncommon. Foreigners traveling to Eritrea from other



Two signs flank a shoe store (closed for lunch) on Liberty Avenue. The sign on the right, in Tigrinya language, refers to May 24th, anniversary of Eritrea's liberation in 1991.



Mural painted on the Derg's reviewing stand at the eastern end of Liberty Avenue. Depicted is a man voting in the 1993 referendum as martyrs of "the struggle" proudly watch him from above.

parts of Africa have often remarked on the refreshing beauty and civility of Asmara. Since I was coming from Addis Ababa, Asmara stood in stark contrast. The center of Addis is dirty and smelly — trash heaps, open sewers and noxious vehicle fumes permeate the air. The center of Asmara is clean and orderly — traffic congestion is rare, and a battalion of street cleaners continually scour the major arteries picking up the few shards of stray garbage. Even the "rules of the road" greatly differ. In Addis, mini-buses and other vehicles dart through the streets in chaotic mayhem; near collisions (and actual collisions) are frequent as drivers rarely look before pulling out into the street, making a turn or switching lanes (in fact, lanes themselves don't really exist). In Asmara, drivers stay in their own lanes (which are painted on the road) and carefully heed strictly-enforced traffic regulations.

My experience as a *ferenji* in both cities was also extremely different. In Addis, I can rarely walk a city block without being accosted by someone asking for money; in Asmara, begging is essentially taboo (although occasionally someone would discreetly approach me and ask for a dollar). In Addis, I stick out like a sore thumb, and am continually approached or harassed for some reason or another. In Asmara I am invisible — my presence is rarely acknowledged, much less emphasized. Eritreans, even kids, go about their business or play unfazed by the presence of a light-skinned "stranger." They don't gawk, they don't beg, they don't all want to run up and talk to me. They are a reserved, private people and by nature not intrusive. I found my newfound anonymity refresh-

<sup>3</sup> Eritreans celebrate the victory of their nationalist struggle and liberation every May 24th, the anniversary of the fall of Mengistu Haile Mariam's Ethiopian government in 1991. Eritrea's independence, however, didn't become official until the national referendum was approved in 1993.



ing but also somewhat unnerving. The symbolism and parallel of how Eritrea was ignored by the rest of the world during its liberation struggle was not lost on me.<sup>4</sup>

I walked around town and ventured into the British Council library where scores of children and teenagers were looking for books; two girls sat at a computer and one typed "African History" on the subject line, preparing to search the on-line catalog. Others sat at tables and read quietly.

Moving on, I saw a boy on the street selling newspapers, the weekly *Eritrea Profile*, the government's English-rag costing 1 nakfa (15 cents). I bought a copy (with a 20 nakfa note) and watched as the boy sold his remaining 12 copies within the minute I stood waiting for my change.

I passed the local fruit, vegetable and grain markets, all of which turned out to be chock full of beautiful produce. The rumors of food shortages I'd heard in Ethiopia turned out to be patently false. The city was quiet and orderly in a way Addis Ababa never has been nor will be. Asmara did not seem like a city that had been bombed nor the capital of a country at war. People were going about their normal business. They weren't talking endlessly of war and the conflict. The television wasn't showing non-stop propaganda, trying to get people worked up into a lather to battle the new "enemy" to the south. There were no armed soldiers on the streets, guarding against... whatever. Asmara seemed to me a stable city and one entirely at peace, particularly with itself.

#### LATER REFLECTIONS: IDEALISM SHATTERED, REALISM REVEALED

My starry-eyed first impressions of Asmara, and my idealistic preconceptions of Eritrea's social revolution rapidly dissipated. A more balanced reality slowly revealed itself — not of heaven in Africa, but of a new nation struggling to create itself and establish its identity. Eritrea is



*A mural showing EPLF fighters moving in to capture the port of Massawa during the war of liberation.*

experiencing serious growing pains as it lays the framework for its new society.

Take for example the realm of governance. Eritrea's government is dominated by war heroes, and President Isaias Afwerki is a figure of mythical proportions within the country. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the rebel movement that successfully led the quest for independence, has been reborn as the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). The current leadership is charismatic, strongly rooted in the principles of self-reliance, and has a long-term vision for rehabilitation and development. It also *seems* eminently popular. However, due to fear of reprisals, it is extremely tough to gauge the Eritrean people's true feelings about their leadership and its performance. Opposition and dissent are not tolerated. There are no other political parties nor private press, and it is nearly impossible to find an Eritrean who will speak critically of government policy. Thus, the newfound *freedom* of Eritrea is counterbalanced by subtle mechanisms of control and repression.

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During the fight for independence, the EPLF simultaneously sought to foster a social revolution. Eritrean women, long oppressed by traditional roles, were in-

<sup>4</sup> During its 30-year war of independence, Eritrea fell through the cracks of the Cold War. The Soviet and American blocs carved out pieces of East Africa, shifting alliances and infusing massive military aid in Somalia and Ethiopia. For strategic and political reasons, neither side ever promoted or assisted the Eritrean cause. Eritrea's fierce self-reliance and independent-mindedness is rooted in this history of neglect. Just as they were ignored during the "struggle", I often felt ignored during my stay in Eritrea. I believe this reception is part cultural and part historical.

cluded as equals in the struggle — they had equal rights and responsibilities for liberating their homeland — both from Ethiopian rule and the bondage of gender subervience. If Eritrea was to be freed, ALL Eritreans, men and women would be needed. Likewise, the social revolution focused attention on the long-neglected peasants, who were stuck in a cycle of subsistence agriculture and poverty. The EPLF, rooted in the principles of Marxism and Maoism, spent considerable effort to organize, educate and empower the peasants.

The EPLF was not merely a guerrilla military force, but also a social movement. EPLF cadres worked hard to earn the trust and support of the Eritrean people, and acted as a *de facto* government by providing health, education and other services in areas under their control. Unlike many so-called “liberation movements,” the EPLF avoided forcefully extracting local resources, intimidating peasants, raping local women or otherwise pillaging the villages they one day hoped to govern. By treating rural people with respect and educating them about the political basis of the struggle, the EPLF built good will throughout the countryside and attracted many young recruits. In doing so, the EPLF leadership laid a solid foundation for future governance and development. Their vision was long-term, built on the conviction of their cause and the supreme confidence of eventual success.

In May 1991, when Eritrea became self-governing, the EPLF set out to rebuild the country and establish new government institutions. Eritrea’s rehabilitation and development strategies have been firmly rooted in self-reliance. Eritrea had fallen through the cracks of the cold war, and as such, had to defeat massive Ethiopia with very little external assistance. This experience created within Eritreans an aversion towards the aid dependency to which much of Africa had fallen prey in the post-colonial era. The new Eritrean government would not repeat those mistakes. They would not be bullied by donors and their country would not be overrun by hordes of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with their foreign staffs zipping around in Land Cruisers. Responsibility for the development of Eritrea lay with Eritreans, and would not be usurped by outsiders.

As an outsider looking in, I was initially very impressed by this unwavering commitment to self-reliance. I had seen the pitfalls of dependency, and the corresponding psychology of disempowerment it caused in other areas of the continent. Many rural people and government agencies with whom I worked in West Africa waited patiently with open hands — they couldn’t possibly initiate their own development activities without someone

from the outside coming with money and expertise to help them along. Not in Eritrea. Here, local resources are primary; external assistance is sought only if considered absolutely necessary, preferably in the form of loans rather than handouts.<sup>5</sup>

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As I began to peel away the layers of Eritrean nation-building, my idealism faded. The social revolution begun during the struggle has, in many ways, been aborted. Power and authority in Eritrean society has become more centralized and authoritarian, rather than more diffuse and decentralized. Investment and private enterprise have been stifled by strict government controls. The long-awaited Constitution, after prolonged national discussion and debate, has yet to be officially adopted. Civil-society institutions — private associations, non-governmental organizations, political parties, private press — have been effectively prohibited. The government has sought a hand in nearly everything, maintaining a vise-like grip on the direction and development of Eritrea’s economic, political and social landscape.

Private initiatives have been viewed with suspicion, and thus many potential enterprises, businesses and non-profits alike, have failed to blossom. After independence, many Eritreans who had lived abroad for decades — in Europe, the United States, and Ethiopia — returned to survey the scene. They came to test the waters, and see if the time was ripe to return to their homeland, establish businesses and raise families. Most left, and have returned annually for visits, but not to live. The atmosphere is not sufficiently open or conducive. Many of the Eritreans who had been living in Ethiopia decided to stay and invest there instead of in Eritrea. The Ethiopian government certainly hasn’t created a model free market, but it has made considerably more progress in privatizing and liberalizing its economy than its neighbor to the north.

In Eritrea, all international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were expelled from the country under the guise of preventing dependency. While self-reliance may be virtuous, the heavy-handed manner in which these NGOs were dumped seems more indicative of paranoia than strategic prudence. And, Eritrean NGOs have not been allowed to emerge as local alternatives to fill the void. Even the nominally private Eritrean Women’s Association and Eritrean Youth Association are closely tied to the ruling party, and scarcely independent enough to launch unsanctioned initiatives. Since 1991, the position of women has largely reverted to old patterns — there are few prominent women in the government, and pre-struggle patterns of male domination have returned to daily life, especially but not exclusively in the rural areas.

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, the Eritrean diaspora has played an extremely important role in Eritrean affairs throughout the past 30 years. The Eritrean Relief Association raised large sums of money and promoted the little-known Eritrean cause throughout Europe and the United States in the 1970’s and 1980’s. Since independence, Eritreans abroad have continued to send hefty remittances (a minimum of 2% of their salaries) to the Eritrean government.

The press is tightly government-controlled, and no independent or critical voices are permitted. This restricts the breadth of dialogue, the discussion of alternative paths and the bubbling of innovative ideas. The general intolerance of dissent affects not only the media but the population at large. The government security apparatus is ubiquitous, thereby hindering free expression. During my five-week visit to Eritrea I heard not one dissenting voice. When I asked expatriates (some of whom have lived in Eritrea for many years) for recommendations of independent thinkers with different perspectives, I repeatedly came up empty.

The absence of political parties (except the EPLF-formed People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in Eritrea is explained as indicative of the unifying force and mass popularity of the current regime. There are no need for alternatives at this point, they claim, as the hefty challenges of reconstruction demand unity of direction and purpose. No matter how well-intentioned, this reeks of authoritarianism. Dissent and opposition just for their own sake are certainly unproductive. However, the stifling of alternatives and the harsh treatment of government opponents undermine both the legitimacy of government authority and the effectiveness of national development.

All of these factors combined indicate that the young Eritrean nation is being built on somewhat shaky ground. The current leaders, especially President Isaias and his inner circle, are strong, popular, charismatic and principled. Eventually, however, they will have to transfer the reins of power to a new generation. Will Eritrea's founding fathers cling to the cult of populist leadership, or will they shape strong institutions, inviolable guaran-

tees of freedom and human rights, a dynamic and diverse civil society and an open, free-market economy?

There has been considerable short-term progress — modest economic development, refugee repatriation, demobilization and reintegration of ex-fighters and rehabilitation of war-shattered infrastructures. The government has been able to create a strong feeling of national identity among Eritrea's nine ethnic groups, and has motivated them to work together on programs of national development. These achievements are commendable and should not be underemphasized. As Africa's newest country, Eritrea is a work-in-progress; seven years of self-governance scarcely form the basis of definitive judgment. The Eritrean people are tough, determined and independent-minded. They will move at their own pace and in their own direction, as well they should.

The challenges that lie ahead are significant. Cliché though it may sound, Eritrea is at a crossroads. There are critical choices currently facing the Eritrean government and people. They must choose between war and peace; between authoritarianism and democracy; between a free, open society or a closed, repressive one. These are not either/or choices, and there are many gray areas between the extremes.

Eritrea is the Horn of Africa's perpetual underdog. Against great odds, after 30 years of sacrifice and struggle, the Eritrean people attained their independence. The path to liberation was not a linear climb; it was studded with obstacles, emboldening advances and strategic retreats. So too with the post-independence tasks of nation-building and development. Again, there will be advances and retreats. Independence didn't mark the end of the struggle, but rather a new phase in Eritrea's ongoing quest for a better life for its people. This road, like the one before it, will be long and arduous.

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Before I knew it, my three-week excursion had turned into a five-week extended trip. The final week of August marked a special event in Asmara, and one that I didn't want to miss: Expo '98. Each year a massive festival is organized at the Expo, a fairgrounds on the road to the airport. Eritreans of all types and stripes come from near and far — the countryside and the diaspora — to celebrate the cultural, ethnic and economic diversity of the country.

Expo '98 was launched at an evening ceremony in Asmara's



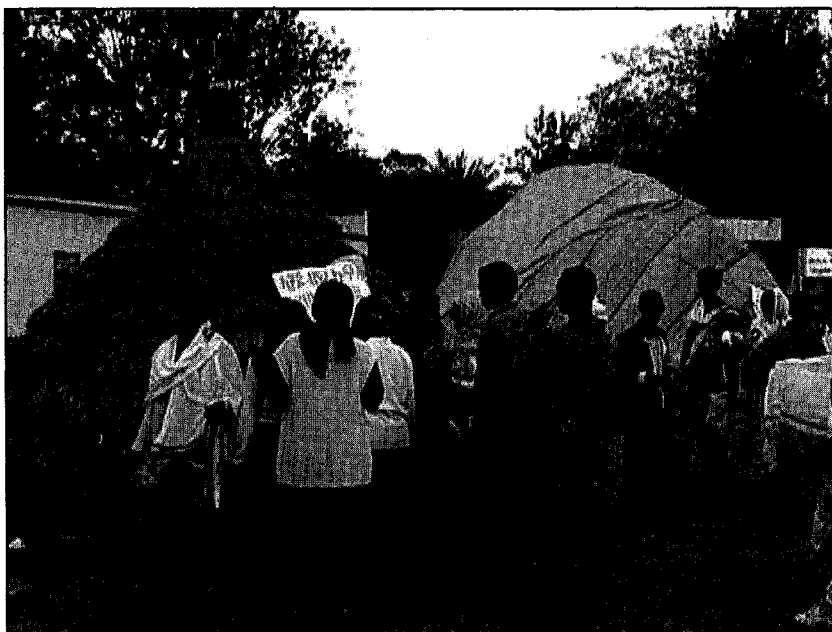
*Saho traditional dance troupe performs at Eritrea Expo '98.*



large outdoor stadium. Each of the nine ethnic groups, dressed in colorful traditional garb, performed their native songs and dances. Then, a series of popular musicians took the stage one by one, performing their hits as the audience politely listened and applauded from their seats. On the running track separating the stage from the stands, rows of war veterans in wheelchairs watched the performances. In typical Eritrean fashion, the atmosphere was one of quiet celebration rather than spontaneous jubilation.

Starting the following day, crowds of people paid the 2 *nakfa* (30-cent) entrance fee to visit the numerous stalls and exhibits, watch traditional dances, eat different ethnic foods and listen to popular singers perform. Over the course of the week, there must have been hundreds of thousands of people in attendance. Factoring in the ongoing conflict with Ethiopia, which caused a marked decline in the numbers of Eritreans visiting from abroad, this turnout was all the more impressive. The stalemated border war notwithstanding, families, young and old, rich and poor, all came together to rejoice in and enjoy the national cultural wealth.

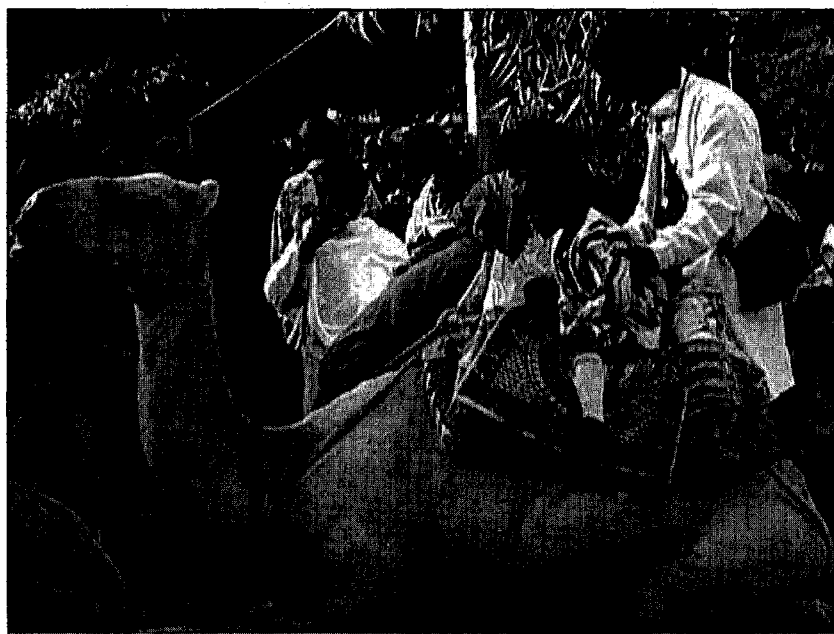
Each of the country's regions displayed their economic produce, historical treasures and traditional crafts. Model huts and homes, the typical dwellings of each major ethnic group, were exhibited. In addition to the



*Waiting in line to visit typical rural houses of Afar and other Eritrean ethnic groups*

many mediocre ice cream stands (Italian *gelati* never quite made it here), food tents scattered throughout the complex offered an assortment of culinary options — fish from Massawa, chunks of beef seared directly on hot coals and, of course, the ever-present *injera* (flat bread made from fermented batter).

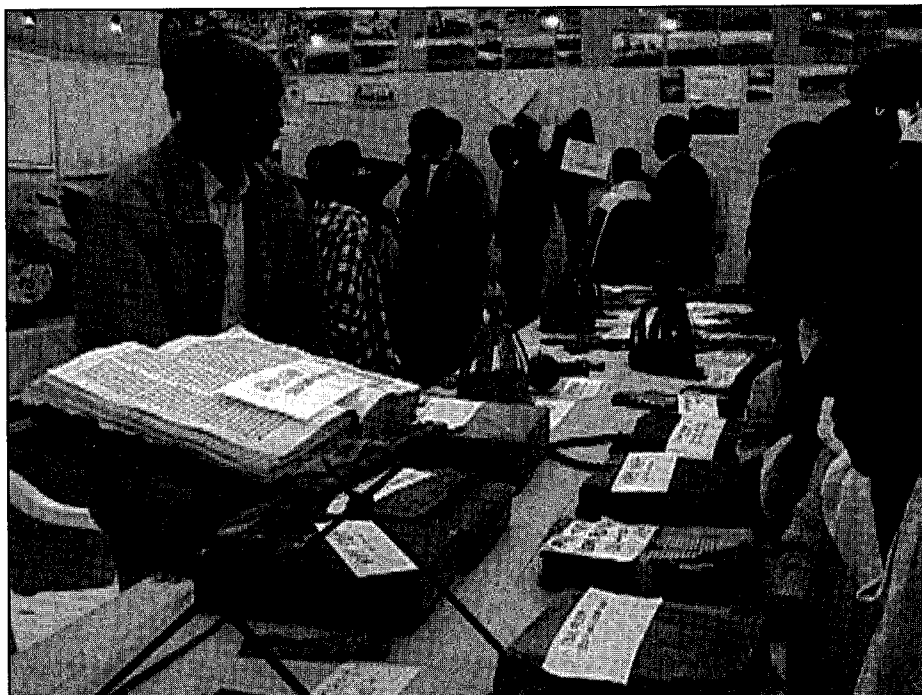
Two large tents served as the Expo '98 version of a shopping mall, the tightly packed stalls hawking various and sundry items at bargain prices. In an open field, children climbed into the ruptured fuselage of an old Soviet airplane that I presume was shot down during the liberation struggle and partially rehabilitated as a historical icon. In another area were camel rides for the children and beer gardens (not "traditional" *per se*, but eminently popular) for the adults.



*Children boarding a camel ride*

The events were well-organized and, aside from the sloshy muddied fields and roads, extremely well laid out and maintained. As I looked around, watching the diverse mix of Eritreans enjoying Expo '98, I was struck by the great potential of this country. Eritrea has a very special richness, a vigorous and deeply-rooted spirit. This was my last experience on that trip, and it restored my optimism for Eritrea's future. The energy, spirit, and diversity I saw at Expo '98 made me a believer once again — my shattered idealism had come full circle; I left Asmara with renewed hope. □

Visitors at the Gash-Barka Region exhibit hall peruse old bibles, crowns and other historical icons.



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## INSTITUTE FELLOWS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

**Adam Smith Albion.** A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Shelly Renae Browning.** A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia and the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology. [SOUTH ASIA]

**Chenoa Egawa.** An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. [THE AMERICAS]

**Paige Evans.** A playwright and former Literary Manager of the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City, Paige is looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts. With a History/Literature B.A. from Harvard, she has served as counselor at the Buckhorn Children's Center in Buckhorn, Kentucky (1983-84), as Arts Editor of the International Courier in Rome, Italy (1985-86), and as an adjunct professor teaching a course in Contemporary American Playwrights at New York University. She joined the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1990. [THE AMERICAS]

**Whitney Mason.** A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called *The Siberian Review* in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the *Vladivostok News* and wrote for *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journalism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Marc Michaelson.** A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." [sub-SAHARA]

**Jean Benoit Nadeau.** A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoit studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization." [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Susan Sterner.** A staff photographer for the Associated Press in Los Angeles, Susan received her B.A. in International Studies and Cultural Anthropology at Emory University and a Master's in Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt. AP gave her a wide-ranging beat, with assignments in Haiti, Mexico and along the U.S.-Mexican border; in 1998 she was a co-nominee for a Pulitzer Prize for a series on child labor. Her fellowship topic: the lives and status of Brazilian women. [THE AMERICAS]

**Tyrone Turner.** A photojournalist (Black Star) whose work has appeared in many U.S. newspapers and magazines, Tyrone holds a Master's degree in Government and Latin American politics from Georgetown University and has produced international photo-essays on such topics as Rwandan genocide and mining in Indonesia (the latter nominated for a Pulitzer). As an ICWA Fellow he is writing and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings. [THE AMERICAS]

**Daniel B. Wright.** A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andreae, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. [EAST ASIA]

**Author:** Michaelson, Marc

**Title:** ICWA Letters -  
Sub-Saharan Africa

**ISSN:** 1083-429X

**Imprint:** Institute of Current World  
Affairs, Hanover, NH

**Material Type:** Serial

**Language:** English

**Frequency:** Monthly

**Other Regions:** East Asia; South Asia;  
Mideast/North Africa;  
Europe/Russia; The Americas

ICWA Letters (**ISSN 1083-429X**) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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