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**Unemployment and Social Disorder during the British Colonial Period in
Eritrea (1941-1951)**

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Abstract

This paper investigates a connection between unemployment and social disorder that characterized British colonial rule in Eritrea between 1941 and 1951. Using the archives of labor of the British period, this article examines the causes of social disorder that galvanized the British period in Eritrea. Based on the archival documents, the article argues that public insecurity and social disorder that troubled Eritrea during British colonial period was largely the outcome of socio-economic conditions that resulted in mass unemployment due to: one, the dissolution of the colonial army institution; two, the destruction of the manufacturing industries; and three, the importation of labor from neighboring countries of British colonies. With the annihilation of Italian colonialism from Eritrea, British colonial system, which was already losing its appetite for maintaining its colonies elsewhere came into Eritrea with no agenda of capitalist expansion. Consequently, it caused massive laid-off labor, which as a result hatched social groups such as migrant workers, brigands and vagabonds. On this backdrop, the current paper offers an alternative explanation to the sources of public insecurity and social disorder that emerged during the brief British colonial era in Eritrea.

1. Introduction

Having defeated Italian colonial forces in Eritrea, British Forces occupied the country in April 1941 as part of the Allied Forces military advancement of WWII campaign. The Allied forces composed of commonwealth forces led by British military strategists advanced towards Eritrea, the then stronghold of axis power in the region. The forces marched from Sudan through the western region of Eritrea to fight fascist Italy stationed in the Horn of Africa. The war ended in favor of the Allied. This incident implies that British arrival in Eritrea was not part of its regular colonial adventure. Rather it was the consequences of large global incident, that is, WWII. Therefore, unlike its ordinary colonial projects where Britain used to impose an indirect rule, Eritrea was exempted from such a colonial system. Instead, it installed a temporary system termed as Occupied Enemy Territory Administration (O.E.T.A), which later changed itself into British Military Administration (BMA).

Elsewhere, British colonial system was known for its indirect rule that involved dual systems as characterized by two separate but subordinate state structures for the ‘natives’ and ‘whites’. One system was designed “...for colonizers, the other for natives; one modern, the other customary.”¹ However, the nature of the state that Britain installed in Eritrea was distinctively different from the normal forms of colonial states it had in other parts of Africa. This is clearly explained in the military administration’s report of 1949. In addition to the shortage of capital expended to run the territory, “[t]he administration is staffed on a temporary short-term basis and has not the advantage of experienced and permanent staff as in a normal colonial Administration.”² In short, Eritrea was neither an ordinary colonial state nor an independent one.

By all accounts, the decade long British colonial system in Eritrea was characterized by serious economic crises and a weak capitalist development. Consequently, social disorder, public insecurity and ever growing economic deterioration followed. Knowing that there was huge capitalist expansion and its resultant massive urbanization, modern capitalist accumulation, huge capital investment under the Italian colonial period, Britain was in no way to match the former colonial power. Let alone to invest, it gravely damaged the capitalist progress thereby causing social disorder and public insecurity. The paper analyzes this part of

¹Mamdani, Mahmood *Citizen and Subjects: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press & Kampala: Makerere Institute of Social Research, 1996/2017) 70

² Eritrea: Annual Report for 1949, British Administration, Eritrea, Asmara, 31st December 1949, F.G.Drew, Chief Administrator, Eritrea, 4

the colonial history of Eritrea by investigating the economic realities. To do so, it raises the following questions: what were the causes of social disorder and public insecurity during the British period? What characterized the economy of British colonial period? What were the responses of the state and the indigenous people to the economic crisis?

The coming of British system for many indigenous people was expected to be the end of European colonialism, but it was not. The lack of clear British colonial objectives exposed the colony to economically precarious situation. Hence, the British colonial state was characterized by numerous socio-economic crises in Eritrea. With the coming of the British, there appeared a huge unemployment rate that was related to the collapse of an economy that fundamentally depended on Italian colonial capital and the destruction of several economic institutions that upheld a huge size of indigenous and white labor. Under this kind of state, a state that lacks stability, economic crisis was its main characteristic feature. Three factors were responsible for this crisis: first, the dissolution of the military institution; second, the destruction of the manufacturing industries; third, the importation of labor from neighboring countries of British colonies.

2. British Colonial State

When the British colonial system in Eritrea was converted from Occupied Enemy Territory Administration (O.E.T.A) into British Military Administration (BMA)), it was faced with serious administrative challenges in governing the colony, mainly suffered from lack of personnel. The administration tried to fill the gap by hiring Italians who had been running the colonial state under Italian system. British military governors felt more comfortable working with their fellow Europeans, though they were potential enemies, than with the indigenous. In the words of Cumming, one of the British governors of the colony, Italians were not there to “supervise Italian rule”, but to rule through the British system. Such resource was a relief for the British incurred on them by occupying Eritrea. While this has a number of advantages such as saving budgets, maintaining the status quo, as well as discouraging the nationalist feelings of the indigenous, it also discouraged them to show care on the indigenous peoples.

Practically, the purpose of the Military Administration was much more than “caretaker”. “The principal aim of BMA was therefore to make the former state structure of the ‘Occupied Enemy Territory’ inoperative, to dissolve the traditional power structure, and to replace it with the British institutional and administrative state apparatus.”³ British indifference to the

³ Gebre-medhin, Jordan, *Peasant and Nationalism in Eritrea: a Critique of Ethiopian Studies* (Red Sea Press, 1989), 74

indigenous population of the colony was not just a matter of colonial attitude but also shortage of finance from the British side, which had already been gravely affected by the consequences of WWII. The colonial administration admitted that the colony was not under a normal colonial system.

The Administration is staffed on a temporary short-term basis and has not the advantage of experienced and permanent staff as in a normal Colonial Administration. Throughout the year there has always been a shortage on establishment, especially of technical personnel—Finance, Legal, Educational, Medical, P.W.D. & C. In spite of this, and of the many changes in staff that have occurred at all levels, the officials of the Administration have applied themselves to the job in hand with the greatest energy and enthusiasm, in the face of work that is continually increasing in complexity and volume.⁴

Financially, managing Eritrea demanded the British a dear price. “The cost of the United Kingdom of the administration of the territories...and including all overhead expenses for head-quarters and so forth, during the past eleven years was about £16,500,000 up to the end of the last financial year on 31 March 1952.”⁵

Italy ruled Eritrea for half a century (1890-1941) during which the Eritrea society was enormously transformed. Capital infiltrated the society through investment in construction, agriculture, and conscription sectors. Determined to establish a settler colony, the Italian colonial state imposed different laws and legislation to expropriate land and labor of the indigenous people. Land dispossession was common in the early period, particularly between 1890-1894. Consequently, the divorce of peasantry labor from means of production took shape. However, the breakup of the pre-capitalist economy took a dramatic scale between 1935 and 1941 during which the colony turned into a war preparation base. Throughout the following periods, peasants and pastoralists were expeditiously depeasantized through conscription and proletarianization.

When the nature of the colonial state changed in 1932 from just an ordinary colonial state to be a launching pad of the expansion for the formation of Italian East Africa Empire, the colony was further mobilized and organized. This intensified the commodification of labor and the rate of surplus extraction from the indigenous people. Obviously this became a major force behind the proletarianization of the indigenous people. When capital massively moved into

⁴ Eritrea: Annual Report for 1949, British Administration, Eritrea, Asmara, 31st December 1949, F.G.Drew, Chief Administrator, Eritrea p4

⁵ Cumming, D.C, “British Stewardship of the Italian Colonies: An account Rendered” *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), 29 (1) (Jan., 1953),15

the colonial economy, the seductive nature of capital increasingly attracted the indigenous people. In the process, this diffused the sentiments that was growing against Italian colonialism and disarmed many growing resistance against it. As a result, colonial economy flourished. As of 1939, there were 25 postal offices and 67 telegraph lines in the communication sector.⁶ In the beginning of 1940s, there were 846 transport enterprises and 383 construction enterprises.⁷ At the end of Italian colonial rule in Eritrea, 2,198 industrial firms, estimated to be 2,198 million lire, and 2,690 commercial firms with an estimated capital of 486 million lire were operational.⁸

However, manufacturing was second in terms of being a source of employment and an agent of transformation for indigenous people. The main agent, perhaps, the core was the colonial Army institution. Economically speaking, pre-1932, change was very gradually and the impact on the indigenous people was very much controlled by the state. Until 1935, there were 4000-5000 indigenous wageworkers.⁹ In terms of capital, the total value invested in terms of Italian Lire between 1900 and 1930 was one hundred million. It was largely invested on the development and maintenance of communication and transportation infrastructure.¹⁰

The trend was changed in 1935 after forty per cent of the working male force of the indigenous people was deployed in the colonial army. Until 1907, the colony was supposed to supply only 5000 men for the army. This was justified that the colony needed to function normally. But with the prolongation of the war in Libya, above all, the plan to invade Ethiopia to create an Italian East African empire, the demand increased to 10,000 men. Salvago Raggi- the then governor of colonial Eritrea- plainly expressed his concern that persistent sending of Eritrean *askaris* (local name for the colonial soldiers) to the war in Libya was building a colony by destroying another, because such a conscription to the army did not only uproot the Eritrean peasant from his farmland but also the total labor from the country. Later, the peasants who were major source of military recruitment were “no were to be found”.¹¹ In 1935, almost all the productive labor of the indigenous people was deployed in the colony army during which the state was forced to subsidize it by importing 50,000 Italian laborers to

⁶ Bereketeab, Redie, *Eritrea the Making of a Nation 1890-1991* (Red Sea Press, New Jersey, 2000), 99-102

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 103-104

⁹ Negash, Tekeste, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882-1941: Policies, Praxis and Impact* (Uppsala: Nordic African Studies Centre, 1987), 45

¹⁰ Ibid, 46

¹¹ Ibid 50-51

the colony. Studies indicate that 130 to 150 thousand young Eritreans were conscripted throughout the Italian colonial period.¹²

Table. 1 percentage of the colonial army out of total male labour force¹³

Year	Size of Army	Total population	Actively productive men	Per cent
1907	5,132			
1912	5,990	330,000	82,000	7.3
1915	7,350	360,000	90,000	8.1
1925	9,082	480,000	120,000	7.5
1928	7,500	500,000	135,000	5.5
1935	60,200	600,000	150,000	40.3

Following the defeat of Italians by the British in 1941, the colonial structure was dismantled and caused a huge laid-off labor. The colonial economy in general and the colonial army institution in particular, which used to be direct or indirect sources of living conditions of a large section of the Eritrean society, was nonfunctional during British colonial era. The British pretext for demolishing the economy was, “when Eritrea was occupied there was a great deal of property there...according to the Manual of Military law, [it] was susceptible to the usages of war. It was created as booty and, naturally, was moved.”¹⁴ Economically, the situation was so dire for the indigenous people. Sir Duncan Cumming, one of the British governors of the colony, described the economic condition in a lecture he delivered at Chatham House in 28th October 1952.¹⁵

In the occupied Italian colonies the soldiers of their large colonial army lost their employment. Their families lost the remittances they had previously received and the discharge men were suddenly thrown back on their tribal and village societies. The highly organized Italian schemes for agricultural and industrial development, together with the subsidies which supported them, were thrown abruptly out of gear.¹⁶

¹² Killion, Tom, “The Eritrean Economy in Historical Perspective,” *Eritrean Studies Review* 1(1), (1996), 90-118.92 and Shroeder, Gunter, *Eritrea’s Economic Survival: Summary record of a conference held on 20 April 2007*, Chatham House, (The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2007), 5-6

¹³ The figures for the actively productive men are based on two assumptions; 1) women constitute about 50 per cent of the population; 2) of the remaining male population children under the age of 16 and old men constitute upto 50 per cent thus leaving a quarter of the entire population in the category actively productive men. Negash, Tekeste, *Italian Colonialism in Eritrea, 1882-1941*, 51

¹⁴ Cumming, D.C, “British Stewardship of the Italian Colonies:

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid ,11

The British Military Administration census on the labor by June 1944¹⁷

Sector	Size
Employed in Agriculture Nomads with flocks etc.	128750
Employed by various services of Administration	11000
Employed by various private firms	9000
Merchants	5000
Unemployed	35000
Total	188750

Sector	Size
General Workers	30000
Servants, Office Orderlies, etc	2000
Clerks, Writers, etc	1000
Cooks, waiters, catering workers	1000
Mechanics, carpenters, builders, drivers, etc	1000
Total	35,000

Needless to say, the demolition of the old colonial system was not the only cause of unemployment, but also the lack of capital and absence of proper objective pertaining the colony. Unlike other colonial projects, the state and British capitalists did not have the motive to invest in the colony. As stated earlier, the British did not come to colonize Eritrea in the true sense of the word nor did they want to stay longer once they occupied it. Normally, the British colonial experience was driven by capitalist expansion. Its mission was different in Eritrea. As the objective of the British administration was primarily for the colony's "care and maintenance," its expenditure on the colony was economical. British Army Council sent an instruction to his subordinates in Eritrea in October 1942 regarding the meaning of "care and maintenance" and the required expenditures. In this instruction, it is stated:

No capital expenditure could be incurred except with specific authority; maintenance work on essential roads was to aim at keeping them in reasonable condition and to avoid unduly heavy capital expenditure during the next ten years; productive expenditure on agriculture to meet war-time difficulties would be considered, and also proposal for the extension of educational facilities among the inhabitants if efficient teachers were available.¹⁸

Therefore, the fact that British mission to the colony was purely temporary and political, it had neither any intention of investing huge capital nor any desire to change the lives of the people. Neither the state nor individual British capitalists had the courage to come and run business. Let alone for economic investment, the colonial state lacked proper budget to carry

¹⁷ British Military Administration, *Central Registration: heading labour exchange; Subject-Unemployment Native labor*, Box 140, File/M Acc no. 11695

¹⁸ Cumming, D.C, "British Stewardship of the Italian Colonies:", 15

out the “care and maintenance” mission. In the annual report of 1949, “[t]he very strictest economy in expenditure and the search for increased revenue has continued...The Administration has not, perhaps, been given the credit to which it is due for its successful efforts in maintaining the relatively small gap between actual expenditure and revenue.”¹⁹ In Cumming’s view, “[t]he United Kingdom Treasury could hardly have been expected to subsidize these territories on the scale that the Fascist Government had thought necessary for their own purposes.”²⁰ Hence the British system had neither the intention nor the capacity to send capital to this territory.

Not only the newly discharged soldiers but also the existing pensioners who participated in Libya, Somalia and Ethiopia who used to receive pension from the Italian colonial state now fell into critical living condition since the British revised the privilege. In the beginning, it used to give them relief, but later it stopped all pensioners. In a meeting held in 26th June 1941, the Deputy Chief Political Officer (D.C.P.O) wrote to the Deputy Chief Finance and Account (D.C.F. & A.) of the Occupied Enemy Territory Administration (O.E.T.A).

I [DCPO] submit that the political importance of continuing the payment of certain classes of pensions that were paid by the Italians in Eritrea deserves careful consideration... The amounts paid to individuals are very small but they concern a large number of Eritreans & it is their pensions that I am especially anxious to continue.²¹

The importance of this recommendation was not much economic but political. According to the DCPO, the failure to continue pension to ex-soldiers would lead to a serious security risks. It was better to pay the small amount of pension than to spend huge expenses for larger forces to maintain security. Pensioners who “hold honoured position on their return to their village have serious influences to make the society that their live is not deteriorated under the British. On the other hand helping the pensioners would enable us to establish friendship with the indigenious.”²² However such concern did not go with the shortage of budget of the colony. According to the letter of DCPO to the Secretary of O.E.T.A, based on their meeting with Col. Rodd on 30th June 1941, “No pensions as such may be paid by O.E.T.A but the principal is

¹⁹ Eritrea: Annual Report for 1949, British Administration, Eritrea, 4

²⁰ Cumming, D.C, “British Stewardship of the Italian Colonies:”,15

²¹British Military Administration, *Labour Pension*, Box 139, File no. 37/D/1, Acc no. 11681[BMA BOX 139, Labour 11666-11682, 37/A/7-37/F/3]

²² Ibid.

recognized that some, if not all, the actual payments must continue. Therefore the only way to affect this is to regard them as relief payments.”²³

In addition to such systemic problem, the importation of labor from other British colonies and the re-installment of Italians in their former positions further deteriorated the conditions of indigenous employment. Whereas the Italians filled the state bureaucracy, the Yemenis, Sudanese and Ethiopians filled the laborer demand. The reinstatement of Italians in the state bureaucracy was done under the excuse of no native capacity to accomplish the responsibilities. In one of the letter corresponded between head of the controller of labour and chief secretary, B.M.A H.Q, the head of the controller of labour, when the chief secretary asked him to employ an Eritrea indigenous man responded like this “there is not much work offering for natives but if you will send this man to my office I will see what I can do for him.”²⁴

In general, unemployment in the city of Asmara reached to 20,000 in May 1943 during which the number of non-European residents was between 110,000 and 120,000.²⁵ The situation was very much clear in a notice advertised to the people of Asmara by the Senior Civil Affairs Office (S.C.A.O.) in 7th June 1943. In the message addressed to all Eritreans and Ethiopian living in Asmara without regular job, who were dependent on relief from friends:

I [Chief of S.C.A.O.] advise all such people [unemployed] that the chance of their hopes being realized is very small...Construction on a large scale is finished. This is something which all of you know. So my advice to all those who are out of work is: do not stay here in the hope of finding something to do, but go back to your villages, before the rains begin, where anyone who wants to work can be sure making a living.²⁶

Such a situation continued until the end of that year. A letter forwarded to the chief Administrator by the Senior Civil Affairs Office (S.C.A.O) on 3rd of November 1943 warns and forecasted the seriousness of the problem in that near future unless intensive propaganda was conducted “for the return” of the unemployed “to the land [or] the absorption of native unemployed work on roads appeared as the only feasible one.”²⁷

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ British Military Administration, *Central Registry: Labour Exchange Applications for Employment General*, Box 139, File No. 37/B, Acc No 11669

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

Even though it was not exclusively about unemployment, the O.E.T.A began to pay due attention when it set up an Executive Board of the Co-ordination of Eritrean Project in October 1941. The issue of employment was part of the important Agendas. The Board included the Chief Secretary of the Administration and a senior staff officer of Eritrean Military Area Headquarters.²⁸ Looking at the scale of the problem of the colony, this Board did not have enough authority that enabled it to settle the challenge of unemployment rate.

However, it introduced some solutions. The first step was the introduction of relief. The lack of budget to pay the pensioners in or on time forced the O.E.T.A to authorize relief programs. In a letter sent by the Finance and Accounting Office to head of District Finance and Accounting department on 20th April 1942 assured that pensioners living in the Districts of Asmara, Adi-Kaih and Adi Ugru received relief at a cost of approximately 156.443 lire per month. He instructed the district heads of Finance and Accounting to reduce the amount of relief below the existing one. He urged them to try their best: “I have to request that you will, as opportunity occurs enquire into the circumstances of these pensioners and reduce or abolish the relief payments according to circumstance, subject to consideration of the political aspects.”²⁹

Even though it did not last long, the arrival of Americans in the region during the War and the construction project they introduced gave some relief to the O.E.T.A. When the British occupied Eritrea, the war was still going on in the Pacific. Eritrea appeared to be an important location, a middle ground, for military base. In addition to strategic location the presence of skilled labor, Italians and Eritrean, in the view of British military strategies, Eritrea became an ideal place for a military base that serves for assembling and repairing of military aircrafts.³⁰ Moreover, it had advanced communication and transportation facilities and enough Italian and indigenous trained labor force.³¹ On the basis of recommendation from British military Officers, the United States Army, which engaged in the war very late, decided to open this base. It established military bases in three different districts, Massawa, Ghinda and Gura. According to a report released by American Consulate in Asmara of August 21st 1942, the

²⁸ British Military Administration, Development of Eritrea, 128-9

²⁹ British Military Administration, *Labour Pension*, Box 139, File no. 37/D/1, Acc no. 11681

³⁰ British Military Administration, Development of Eritrea, 125

³¹ Ibid 125-27

American military base across Eritrea provided 1274 employment opportunities for the local populaces.³²

However, this did not last more than two years. The American staffs withdrew from Eritrea in 1943 with the end of the war in Africa. The other side of the story of the stay of American military staff in the country was the fact that it resulted in a serious pressure on the local economy; it exacerbated the economic condition of the colony. The economic plan of Americans in the country was to make it a marketplace. With the exception of labor, all supplies, mainly food, had to be imported from the US. However, in practice, it was not applied.³³ The failure of this plan accompanied by the military staffs' lavish expenditure of resources caused a serious price increase on food products, which was already insufficient. Such an increase in demand along with maladministration of monetary system farther deteriorated the living condition of the employed people. Prices increased with the increase of British and American military personnel, which was aggravated by the lack of common currency in the market because the British were still using Italian lire. The administration tried to sterilize lire by valorizing what was in circulation. But this was not successful as the flow of lire increased from Ethiopia on one hand, and on the other the inadequate supply of consumer goods. This made the living standard from bad to worse.

The third attempt made by the British Military Administration to solve the unemployment problem was by deporting non-Eritrean 'native laborers'. When unemployment among the indigenous population grew in 1943, the chief Administrator of the colony, Brigadier Stephen H. Longrigg, issued a letter to all heads of the regions. In his letter, he stated: "[i]n view of forthcoming unemployment, and to a certain extent to improve the security position, it may be advisable to export back to their countries of origin such non-Eritrean native as we have. The chief of these are, of course, Sudanese and Yemenese."³⁴

During this period, the number of registered non-Eritrean natives in one region what was called Akele Guzai were 1481. Among those laborers were citizens of Egyptian, Ethiopian, Somalia, Sudan, and Yeman.³⁵ Most of them were employed in the American military base in Gura. In general, in 1943 there were 110,000 non-Eritrean 'indigenous laborers' in the colony.

³²American Military Activity in Eritrea, September 26, 1942. The Foreign Service of the United States of America, American Consulate, Asmara, Eritrea, August 21, 1942, 5

³³ British Military Administration, Development of Eritrea, 127-28

³⁴ British Military Administration, *Central Registration: heading labour exchange*; Box 140,

³⁵ Ibid

Longrigg proposed the state to round them up thereby deporting them to their respective countries of origins.

I am of the opinion that the only way to solve the unemployment problem is to do what the police are doing at the present moment but on a very much larger scale, i.e. to round up native [non-Eritrea] who are walking the streets and to place those with exemption permits and those without any form of identity card at all into a camp, and to repatriate in groups.³⁶

Later, deportation became a serious program. In a meeting held at the Office of chief secretary in 20th July 1943, attended by Deputy Chief Secretary, Commissioner of Police, Senior Civil Affairs Officer, controller of labor etc, the problem was a top issue and was farther discussed in the following meeting. Based on the minutes of the meeting:

Native unemployment is confined mainly to two centres of population—Asmara and Massawa. The number estimated is about 10,000 of which at least 7,000 are believed to be Sudanese, Ethiopians and Yemeni. The deportation of alien natives is taking place at the present time at the rate of 600 to 700 per month.³⁷

The police commissioner recommended the deportation of all who had even proper official documents. The consequence of such an austerity measure was socially, economically and politically unbearable.

The situation in the rural area was worse than in the urban centers. After the collapse of the colonial economy and the military institution, a huge section of the labor remained disoriented. Labor, whether in the productive sector or in the army, could not get transferred to capitalist employment because, first, it did not have employable technical skill, and second, if there was any, there existed no enough opportunities of employment. As a consequence of this situation, a considerable number of the conscripts moved back to rural area, though they were encountered with unexpectedly worse living conditions. Many found themselves unwilling to stay in the village under such a dire condition. Most of the conscripts had stayed in the army more than four years. Those who joined the institution too young did not even have any skill how to plough the land, and for others, the military culture eroded their peasantry attitude. Most returnees who were close to urban centers preferred to live between towns and rural area. However, those who opted full time peasantry life found it very harsh to continue agrarian mode of living for two stark realities: first agriculture was hopeless due to lack of rain and recurrent invasion of locusts. And in terms of living condition, most

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

conscripts found agriculture more laborious than the military. Second, the amount of money they gained from military salary was more flexible to translate into other needs. In addition to the tantalizing nature of modernity, which most of them found too hard to resist, their exposure to military life showed them the existence of other modes of living outside agriculture, which seemed to be easier, though life demanding task.

3. Unemployment and Social Disorder

Though the colonial state tried to settle the matter, economic crisis escalated out of control, causing a series of social disorder manifested in the form of strikes and public insecurity. In 1949, two major incidents shook the nerve of the British Military Administration: one, the strike conducted by the workers of shipping line in Massawa and by the workers of railway department in Asmara. Both strikes request a payment equivalent to workers' laborious tasks they were accomplishing and in line with the increasing living condition of the colony. The strike of the shipping line stayed for one week until the shipping agency agreed to make overall increments on the salary.³⁸ The strike of the railway department continued for six weeks until the state sanctioned an increase in payment for the lower grades only.³⁹

More than the strikes that affected the public insecurity, the emergence of brigands, locally called as *shifita* worsened the situation. However, this was not the only new social group that emerged out of that economic crisis, but migrant workers and vagabonds to some extent contributed to make it worse. According to Hussey, a British officer reported: "As regards Public Security there is a certain amount of larceny in Asmara, much of which may be put down to the fact that so many of the people have no other means of subsistence. Also in the streets of Asmara many beggars are to be found, especially from among the child population...of more serious nature are cases of highway robbery by so-called '*shifita*'."⁴⁰ In a letter sent to Chief Secretary on 28th February 1945 from Chief of Office of the Senior Civil Affairs, the above condition seemed to be a common incident everywhere in the country:

It is realized by all that the unemployment problem among the native urban population is bad and is likely to get worse:...owing to this unemployment, there has been a most noticeable increase of vagabonds...who have organized themselves into gambling gangs, preying on the public and contemptuous of the police.⁴¹

³⁸ British Military Administration, Eritrea: Annual Report for 1949,.10

³⁹ Ibid..4

⁴⁰ Hussey, E.R.J. "Eritrea Self-Governing", *African Affairs*, Vol. 53, No.213 (Oct., 1954), 321

⁴¹ British Military Administration, *Central Registration: heading labour exchange*, Box 140,

Whereas some people became vagabonds, others pursued seasonal job in the neighboring countries as migrant workers. While unemployed Eritreans migrated to Ethiopia and Sudan, which continued to be the destination throughout the 20th century, unemployed Italians moved to Keyna, Djibouti, Uganda as far as Saudi Arabia and India, following the footsteps of British forces.⁴² Usually those who migrated to Ethiopia were professional Italians and Eritreans, whereas Sudan was a destination of plantation workers.⁴³

The first Eritrean migrant workers appeared when some unemployed laborers crossed to Sudan following the deterioration of agricultural harvest in western lowland parts of the country. Previously, after Italy occupied Eritrea, there were some Eritreans who were assigned to work in Ethiopia. But it was during the British colonial period that voluntary migrant workers began to flow to the later country. The flow of unemployed Eritreans to Sudan, from the official’s point of view, was a relief. In one of the reports forwarded to the Chief Secretary, a Senior Division Officer of Western Province of the colony approved the importance of Eritreans working in Sudan. “ [T]he temporary migration by those workers is of value to Eritrea as well as to the Sudan, for they bring money back to the territory ... and this is spent in the local shops.”⁴⁴

Statistics of migrant worker to Sudan between 1946 and 1951⁴⁵

Year	Workers
1946	150
1947	250
1948	550
1949	400
1950	328
1951	970

With the growing rate of unemployment, Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia began to host more Eritrean migrant workers better than the Sudan. Whereas migrants headed to the later worked in plantations, most of the migrants who destined to the former were professional Eritreans and Italians.⁴⁶ British Private Company known as Aramco, which was operating in Saudi, was the biggest employer. This company preferred to hire Italians than Eritreans. Besides to this,

⁴² British Military Administration, *Labour Pension* Box 139, File no. 37/B/1 Vol. II Acc no 11570

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Ibid

some Italians migrated to Uganda, India, the Far West, Saudi Arabia, Kenya and Djibouti.⁴⁷ In the beginning, most of these migrant workers did not stay there more than four months. But as living conditions deteriorated, some decided to resettle there permanently. Regionally, reports show that Akeleguzai contributed a relatively bigger number of Eritrean migrant workers because it was the main source of labor in the colonial army.⁴⁸

Internal Migration was another feature of this period. After the collapse of the military institution, many servicemen returned to their homeland to lead a peasantry living. There were two kinds of returnees: one kind was composed of individuals who sustained no injury in the battles they fought for the colonial army but who after the collapse of the military institution became unemployed. The second type was composed of ex-military members who were discharged due to sustained injuries. Large part of the ex-conscripts who survived the war returned home. During critical agrarian crisis, this batch of individuals used to migrate to plantations such as Algider and Omhajer. Discharged injured ex-conscripts began to lead their lives in between rural and urban spaces because the pension given to them by the British was irregular and sometimes given to them in kinds.

The most serious social disorder that disturbed the Administration was highway armed robbery. According to the 1949 annual report of the Administration, “[p]olitically the year 1949 has been uneasy and eventful...the Administration has continued to perform its difficult and thankless task in the face of continued political uncertainty, of increasing threats to public security, and of increasing pressure of work.”⁴⁹ The report state that officials until 1948 had been able to travel across the territory without escort, but as of 1949, “[t]his is hardly the case.”⁵⁰ An account of regional police officers claims that most members of *shifta* groups have previous experiences of fighting. “Given the act they used to take the ambushes and the escapes as well as the fight with policy at times indicate that these people are experienced fighters.”⁵¹ In one of the monthly political reports of 1950, authorities became so concerned as the *shifta* begun to replace the official authorities.

The comparative immunity enjoyed by *shifta* in the past has so seriously weakened the authority of the Administration that an increasing number of

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ British Military Administration, Development of Eritrea, 143

⁴⁹ British Military Administration, Eritrea: Annual Report for 1949 2

⁵⁰ Ibid.4

⁵¹ British Military Administration, *Shifta Activities*, box 295 file sh/97 vi Acc-13426

persons are now prepared to defy the Administration, usurp its authority, and take the law into their own hands. In the past the weight of the Administration's authority and prestige proved sufficient to deter all but the most desperate from taking to a life of outlawry.⁵²

In the 1950s, in some parts of Serae region, *shifita* replaced the state authority.⁵³ As the state had come to realize that the rural area was increasingly affected by the *shifita* incidents, it introduced a number of counter measures. On 7th August 1944, Commission of police in Asmara issued a notice ready to reward between £ 100 to 200 to anyone who cooperated in capturing any known *shifita*. Even though there was no clear indication related to this notice, in 1944, the administration arrested 51 people for armed robbery in Barka region alone, the most affected region.⁵⁴ Since 1945, this method was upgraded to be a collective reward or collective fin for capturing or harbor *shifita* respectively.⁵⁵ When a village called Adi BUHNUNA was found guilty of not informing the authorities of the presence of *Shifita* in its village, the Chief administrator of the colony had to issue this order.

In exercise of the powers vested in me as Chief Administrator and in Pursuance of Article 186...I order the payment of collective fine of East African Shilling 1200 (one thousands two hundred) by the village of Adi BUHNUNA in the SERAE Administrative Division, for failing to inform the authorities of the presence of part of Asserassai Embaie's gang in their village during the engagement which took place at ADi LAGHEN on the 2nd November 1950.⁵⁶

In early 1950, the administration increased its security measures by recruiting additional force from the indigenous people and by introducing a system called "Village Guards Scheme."⁵⁷ In the Village Guard Scheme, the state armed members of the village to guard their village from any outlaws mainly *shifita*.⁵⁸ Notwithstanding that this counter measures enabled the state to increase contact with the people, they were less effective in stabilizing the security of the colony. In one of the instruction letters sent "TO ALL THE HEADS OF DISTRICTS,

⁵² British Military Administration, Eritrea, No. 53 Monthly Political Report, May 1950, Headquarters, Asmara, 31st may 1950; and British Military Administration, *Anti-Shifita: Shifita fines & Punishments Akele Guzai*, Box 293, File sh/15 V.I. Acs. 13403

⁵³ British Military Administration, Eritrea, No. 53 Monthly Political Report, and British Military Administration, *Shifita Crimes and outlaws Agordat*, Box 293, File 263/AGo, Acc 13398, p.2

⁵⁴ British Military Administration, *Shifita Crimes and outlaws Agordat* Box 293, File 263/AGo, Acc 13398

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ British Military Administration, "Home Guard Plan: Anti-Shifita Distribution of Arms, Issue of Rifles to District chiefs, Box file 294, File sh/60, Acc. 13414

TRIBES AND VILLAGES" by the Chief administration in October 1950 clearly shows the concern of the administration about the growing shifta activities:

During the past month there has been peace in Eritrea to an extent that the country has not known for a long time...Recently there have been signs that shifta may again become active...shifta cannot operate in Eritrea without the knowledge and help of the people...I again call on all law abiding people to prevent the shifta from causing further trouble. It is entirely to their advantage that they should do so because otherwise they may suffer more from the security measures of the Administration than from the shifta.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, not all shiftas were product of the economic crisis. Some had family feud and others particularly those who become active since 1950, a huge part of them were politically motivated. Politically, the last two years (1951-1952) of British military Administration, were a period when the Eritrea people was preparing a UN sponsored federal program with Ethiopia. Ethiopia under the crown of Haile Selassie, used the Shifta system as an important political instrument to intimidate nationalists thereby persuading the international community that the colony was vulnerable and insecure and thus should be stripped off its autonomous status. Evidence, however, shows that most of the ringleaders of the shifta movement were either Ethiopians or Eritreans sponsored by the Ethiopian monarchy.⁶⁰

4. Conclusion

The arrival of British occupation in Eritrea altered the course of capitalist development in the colony. Owing to the lack of capital and lack of proper colonialist project, Britain denied the colony any sort of capitalist development. The fact that the arrival of the British to the region was accidental, political disinterest and long term projects of economic investment remained precondition for the economic crisis characterized by mass unemployment. By the end of Italian rule, the peoples of Eritrea found themselves in a different socio-economic condition where new semi-capitalist forces emerged due to intensive penetration of capital, which disturbed the patriarch agrarian society. By the end of British rule, the societies found themselves immersed in political and economic crises.

Even though both the Italian and the British periods were different forms of capitalist manifestations, each caused labor mobility, but in an opposite direction. While the Italian period resulted in mass depeasantaization of labor that moved peasants from rural to urban,

⁵⁹ British Military Administration , *Rehabilitation of Ex-Shifta*, Box file 296, file s/sh/99/A Acc.13431,,

⁶⁰ Tesfai, Alemseged, *Federation Eritra ms Ethiopia kab Matienzo ksab Teddla 1951-1955*, (Hdri Publishers, Asmara 2005, 44-51)

this trend was reversed to repeasantization of labor in the form of urban-rural migration during the British period. Consequently, in mid 1940s, pressure on land in rural area increased. Unemployed labor, particularly, military servicemen had nowhere to go but to come back to the agriculture. When they found agrarian life so harsh, some of the laborers began returning to urban areas. This left the labor in constant transition process moving between rural and urban areas back and forth.

The long-term impact of the above historical period resulted in the emergence of a fragmented labor manifested as migrant workers, vagabonds and brigands. Notwithstanding, a significant size of the unemployed laborers preferred to lead their lives by moving between rural and urban places. Some also pursued migration to Sudan, Ethiopia and other neighboring countries in search of job. Those who were incapable of doing so turned to be vagabonds and brigands thereby creating serious challenge to public insecurity. This trend obviously threatened the collapse of the little capital gained from the Italian colonial state. Knowing that the majority of Italian capitalists had already left the colony after the defeat of Italy, those who remained in the colony hoped that the BMA would allow them to freely operate began to be so skeptical and confused by the activities of the British particularly its failure to handle the armed robbery.

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