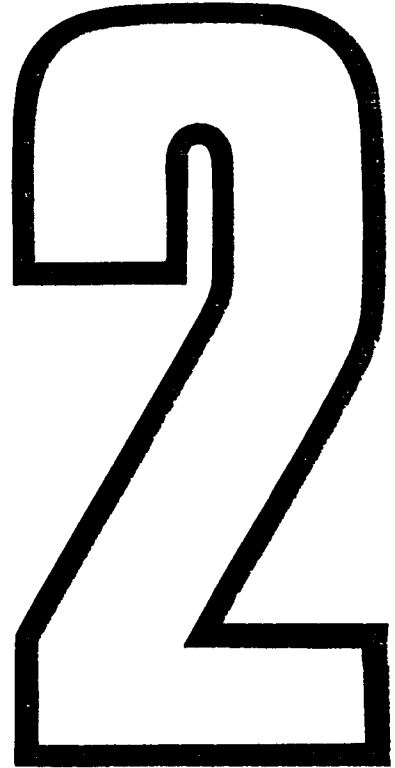


Karl Eric Knutsson: **Report from
Eritrea**



Symptoms of Partiality

In "Aftonbladet" (ed. in Sweden) the Ethiopian minister of information has adamantly denied that reports on the massacres in Eritrea, given by one of the best friends of the Ethiopian people, the Swedish missionary Olle Hagner, have any foundation, dis-nursing them as being mere symptoms of partiality. According to him, Hagner was speaking on behalf of the liberation front. That is simply an easy way out. Very likely I myself will be accused of being equally biased. And I willingly admit that I do take sides. Not the side of any special grouping within the Ethiopian internal political system, but that of people in the peasants' stone-built villages and the herdsmen's huts. This is a partiality which would should be readily understood by those who have ordered these people's homes to be laid waste, and the innocents to be cruelly shot down.

All Friends of the Ethiopian people, not least in Sweden, realise that the current situation in Eritrea is being extremely serious. If it is a case of a revengeful army running amock on its own, control of the troops must be re-established, and the guilty brought to trial. If the cruelties are part of a planned policy the Ethiopian government must be made aware that this policy, solely, and nothing else, is in fact creating the very situation which

they are trying to prevent - namely the disintegration of the Ethiopian nation.

Events like those I have described will certainly also impress people who sincerely want to better the conditions in Ethiopia by improving the living conditions, including the health, education, and economy, of the poor people in the rural districts, and in the slum areas of the cities.

What Happens If Our Aid Terminates?

The most simple conclusion would be: Let us terminate the co-operation! But this would mean that we chose to "punish" exposed people in other parts of the country, because the people in another part are suffering injustices.

And even if our aid is of limited dimensions, what will happen if it ceases? Wouldn't Ethiopia be still more isolated and forced to depend on American strategic interests? Won't this mean that the progressive forces and politicians in the country - and certainly they are not few - will have even fewer possibilities to work for a change? When I stress my dislike of the injustices in Eritrea so strongly, it does not mean that the questions posed above can be easily and readily answered, but the present situation cannot be allowed to continue.

Comments to the Eritrea articles

I have been asked by the IWGIA to permit the circulation of two newspaper articles about the present situation in Eritrea written upon my return from a revisit to the area during December 1970 and January 1971. When I now comply with this wish I want to make some comments about the purpose of this circulation.

First of all the intention is not primarily to inform about and react against current events in the Northern Ethiopian region. This purpose the articles have already filled. I have accepted republication because it may contribute to a discussion of if and how an anthropologist who is confronted with similar situations ought to respond.

For my own part I hold that an anthropologist who is a guest both of the local community in which he lives and of the country that has accepted his work, should show the utmost care not to interfere unnecessarily in local and national politics. If he chooses to do so he should try to find a constructive way of forwarding his opinion. With this I mean that he should not seek to execute a private demonstration only for its own sake but he should strive to make a concrete contribution to the solution of the problems which according to him makes publicity or other communication necessary.

Another point which I feel is important is that he, whatever media he chooses for his message, should strive to look at the situation presented from the point of view of his host people on the local level. This implies that he should communicate not only - for instance in the Eritrean case - his own emotional reactions to suffering and atrocities. He should also as much as possible try to inform about major traits of local and regional social organization as well as of the dominant processes which can be observed. This is necessary if he wants to avoid harmful oversimplification of situations which can only be understood and acted upon if the complexity of the problems is admitted and respected.

Stockholm 26th april 1971
Karl Eric Knutsson

Karl Eric Knutsson is professor and head of the Department of Social Anthropology, the University of Stockholm.

IWGIA - International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs - is a nonpolitical and nonreligious organization, concerned with current problems of suppression against ethnic groups in various countries.

Secretariat: Frederiksholms Kanal 4 A
DK 1220 Copenhagen K, Denmark

The views expressed in IWGIA-documentation are those of the authors, and not necessarily those of the organization.

WHAT HAPPENS IN ERITREA?

During the last weeks newspapers, radio, and television have reported events in Eritrea which indicate an exacerbation of the critical situation in the northernmost province of Ethiopia. Sources in Syria speak of bombings of cities and churches; statements that are instantly denied by the Ethiopian government. Missionaries having profound experience from work in Eritrea report the massacre of civilians, but are discounted as liars and secret agents of the Eritrean liberation front by the Ethiopian ministry of information.

More and more people ask themselves: What is going on in Eritrea? After a revisit to the province during the Christmas month in order to follow up a field study that was made at intervals during 1969 and 1970 it is my duty to raise that question in public. I am unable to give an unambiguous or simple answer to that question. Nevertheless I have to pose it, since the people out in the villages who have given me their confidence and my possibilities of work cannot do it, and because at the same time they are being exposed to insupportable injustices.

My choosing to speak out now is no easy decision. I know that my report may have personal repercussions as well as affecting the people whose case I present. My conclusion has been however, that silence would be the greater evil.

An Ethiopian province

Since 1962 Eritrea has formally been a province in state of ETHIOPIA. For province in the state of ETHIOPIA. For thousands of years the area - in particular the Tigrinja-speaking highlands - has been part of the Ethiopian state or state federation - depending on the historical epoch in question. Not until the heavy territorial expansion in the

south and east, which took place during the 19th century, did it end up as a marginal area of this state.

Geographically, linguistically, culturally, and religiously Eritrea has thus for a long time been part of a North or Central Ethiopian state.

The ruler of the Eritrean highlands was at the same time the "Bahar Nagash", the ruler of the sea. This meant that he controlled the lowland area towards the Red Sea. Here, near the coast, was also the place where the first intruders, first Turks and later Italians, in their attempts to get a footing on the southern coast of the Red Sea, were met by Ethiopian armed forces.

Fields - Livestock

The population of present-day Eritrea shows a picture in accordance with the geographical variations. In the cool, relatively rainy highlands a peasant population lives in large stone-house villages of high solidarity. In the hot, torrid lowlands pastoral Beni Amer, Mensa, and Bilen wander in the west, the Saho and the Afar, or the Danakiles, as they are also called, in the east. In the highlands the old-fashioned, orthodox Christian church dominates, while the people of the lowlands are mostly Muslims.

A further characteristic division can be made on examination of the ethnic population of the cities, especially Asmara, Keren, and Massaua, which all represent a mixed pattern of ethnic and religious groups. Here as compared to the rest of Ethiopia live a relatively large number of the "middle class" with a high percentage of comparatively well educated people.

The Villages of Equality

Against this general background I shall try to picture some features of a piece of Eritrean everyday life. I do this because the picture that I wish to paint contains important information, primarily contains important information, primarily about the highland peasants, but also about Eritrea in general.

(I also do it in order to describe the motives leading to my investigations, and to concretize the perspective from which I judge the events that I shall deal with below.)

From what follows I hope will emerge some of the motives for my having made this investigation, together with an indication of my bias.

Initially, what led me to the villages of the Eritrean highlands was my interest in trying to map out the forms of landholding that have emerged through generations of local experiments. What was particularly interesting was that these people independently and according to their own values have elaborated a system of land distribution which can satisfy the most extreme demands to a basic social justice. In most villages there exists no private property right. Land is the common property of the village. Every household, no matter whether it consists of a whole family or of a family broken up through death or divorce, has a right to an equally large part of the village land.

Chance Decides

However, not even this radical principle of equality satisfies the Eritrean highland peasant. In order to prevent some from getting better soil than others and to prevent single persons from claiming special rights is a particular plot of the village land,

a redistribution by lot is made every seventh year. The demand for justice and the resistance against all tendencies of maintaining individual rights of control are also reflected in an advanced organization of distribution committees, inspectors, boards of arbitration and boards for matters concerning land.

That hundreds of thousands of peasants live within this system and millions of others within similar patterns of village collectivism, is by itself an interesting fact to everybody who keeps talking about the feudal Ethiopia. But apart from that - and this is much more important - knowledge of the way these systems are organized and function appeared to me absolutely essential to any planning of development programmes in this region. Here was an area where many problems of land reform had already been solved in principle. However, would it be possible to establish a reasonable economical growth along with this? Those responsible for the Five-Years-Plans seem to think that the establishment of a private property right is replace the land-holding system represents the only possibility. With this background in mind I would like to advance two views which in my opinion are of importance.

How have Others solved the Problems

First: Let us see how the people have tried to solve their problems, who, in contrast to Western super experts, have been forced to take an attitude to the whole difficult complex of problems of agriculture in a poor, torrid, heavily eroded, and densely populated area. They seem to have given a priority to the problems of distribution.

Second: Planning to make landholding private, thus possibly improving the

prospects of higher yield in short time, will inevitably in the long run introduce a whole complex of social problems which had not existed within the present system and which will certainly not be more simple to solve than the problems of economical growth.

An Essential Condition

I became convinced that a far-sighted and intensive investigation of traditional forms of collective land control in all its aspects would be an essential preliminars in all experiments on rural development, not only in Ethiopia, but also in all other parts of the world where the inhabitants have created such systems through trial-and-error.

Such convictions should weigh heavily in future research, considering that, in the long run, it will probably be of most help to those who have allowed me to intrude and participate in their daily life.

It may seem as if this belief in the long-term value of an intimate knowledge of the relations between people and their land in the Eritrean peasant community ought to make me refrain from actions which may complicate or obstruct the continuation of my work. That I now choose to make a step that most probably will render further studies impossible only emphasizes the gravity of the present situation. I shall return to this in a following article.

THE PROBLEM OF ERITREA

The Christmas month should have been a period of intensive work in highland Eritrea. An renewed grant had made it possible for me to continue the research that I had initiated

a couple of years ago. But the conclusions of my first report did not turn out to be valid in the way I had imagined. In the neighbouring village everybody - between 600 and 700 - has been driven away by the Ethiopian army. Half of the village has been burnt, i.e. only the Muslims' houses. I dare not think of how long they are going to survive without their land and cattle. In the village where I have done my main work people have been executed or disappeared. Who was responsible, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) or the government? Nobody knows.

It is true that Keren on the Western slope of the highlands has not been bombed, but outside Keren there had been clashes before Christmas between the army and ELF. After the ELF-forces had retired, a village in the vicinity of Keren met its Song My. 460 corpses of women and children were counted when people from the neighbourhood, after 48 hours, ventured into the ruins to bury the dead.

In that single area 10 villages were burnt during that week, and thousands of people were driven from their homes and possibilities of support. Not far from there villagers were ushered into a mosque under the pretext that they were to be sheltered from an air raid. The mosque was surrounded, and everybody - about hundred - were shot. The thesis of the central propaganda that the liberation front is an exclusively Arabian and Islamic movement is effectively contradicted by burnt-down Coptic and Catholic churches.

In a curve of the mountain road towards the Red Sea I am forced to halt. A military lorry loaded with soldiers has stopped. Ten men jump down from

the truck and proceed to help themselves to the flock of a nomad shepherd. Scared to death, he dared not utter one word of protest.

False Denials

The denials of my statements by the Ethiopian ministry of information are worthless. My statements are true, and the denials false. What has happened is no once-only event. Burning villages in order to force people into fortified and controllable communities has happened before. The pattern can be recognized from South East Asia. But what has happened now is such a terrible escalation of the injustices to the civilians that the Eritrean problem is no longer only an Ethiopian problem.

The Eritrean problem is not one but several, and different people will interpret it in different ways. Undeniable though are historical events resulting in the present situation. After the Italian occupation, Eritrea was administered by the British from 1941 to 1952, During both periods changes were brought about that contributed to weakening the strength of the old ties to Ethiopia.

Mainly during the British period the basis was laid of a school system, an organization of medical care, and a local administration, which are still of a standard far higher than what is found in most other parts of Ethiopia. This constructive work was continued during the so-called federation period from 1952 to 1962, when Eritrea was linked to Ethiopia through a federation under the supervision of the UN. Political parties, trade unions, and a parliamentary, democratic government system were founded.

Corruption and Terrorism

In 1962 a full union with Ethiopia was founded. All means were used by the Ethiopian government in order to enforce this complete union: corruption, terrorism, and nationalistic propaganda. Large parts of the population certainly gave their sympathy to a union. The common historical tradition, in particular in the highlands, is strong, as is the feeling of solidarity with the regions originally perceived by the Ethiopians as the ancient "core" - the provinces of Eritrea, Begender, and Tigre.

However, the course of the events after the union's formation has made even the most Union-minded Eritreans despair. The political organization has been broken down, the economic life has been seriously damaged by the heavy centralization towards Addis Abeba, the discrimination against Eritrean students is obvious, and the local forces of order have largely been replaced by forces from other provinces.

Before 1962 Ethiopia controlled the defence forces, the foreign police, and crucial financial questions. What the "separatists" demanded from the beginning was the right of organizing their own administration and maintaining the political organization that had been built up. By refusing them these limited rights the Ethiopian government gave impetus to the separatist movement that is now increasingly gaining ground. In the same way, the army through its meaningless actions is helping to consolidate a liberation movement which had only a limited support from the people until a short time ago.

The Liberation Front and the Separatists.

That I am in opposition to the crimes against the people of Eritrea does not mean that I support the separatist interests. Nobody except the enemies of the African states will profit from a Balkanization of Africa. Moreover it is clear that the liberation army and the separatists constitute a coalition of several different groups that are unified by the antagonism towards the Ethiopian-Amharian central power, rather than through a strong feeling of mutual interests.

The front has a core group consisting of those who were fighting for an independent Eritrea already before the union with Ethiopia. This group has a dominating element of Muslims, particularly from the Western and Northern lowland areas. Here live ethnical groups like Beni Amer and others, who traditionally have maintained close contacts with Sudan. Another group, probably of a steadily increasing importance, consists of former administrators and politicians of federal Eritrea before 1962. Frequently they are Eritreans from the highlands, and Christians, Orthodox, Catholics, or Evangelics.

Of quite a different character are the cadres of young and mostly well educated front members, who are recruited from the masses of excluded university students and high school students, and who have increasingly turned the movement in a socialist direction. Still another group of active or passive supporters is made up by business people and entrepreneurs who have suffered losses following the degrading of the Asmara region from a relatively independent economical position down to the level of an Ethiopian province. - The picture is further complicated by the

number of traditional highwaymen who, still practising their trade, have found it practical to appear as members of the liberation front.

On the whole the people's front, in spite of its heterogeneity, presents a picture of discipline and responsibility. This is especially true of their attitude towards the development programmes in the field of education and prophylactic health care in the Eritrean rural districts. Its message, though only having a limited effect last summer, at least in the highlands, now has been widely propagated, thanks to the injustices of the army.

The High Political Play

Finally any final judgment has been further complicated by the fact that the conflict has been utilized for political manœuvring in the Red Sea area, in which the final responsibility of the mise-en-scene rests with the US and the USSR. That Italy has not forgotten and will not forget the old ties to its former African colony is another factor which complicates the situation. However, and this is highly important, none of these external factors can explain the Liberation Front's current escalating of animosities. Neither is the Ethiopian government's allegation of foreign aggression any excuse for the genocidal actions that the army is practicing in Eritrea. I can understand Ethiopia's fear of being cut off from the Red Sea. But it must also be clearly stated that the course of action now being followed by Addis Ababa is the safest guarantee of a final failure of the endeavours towards unity.