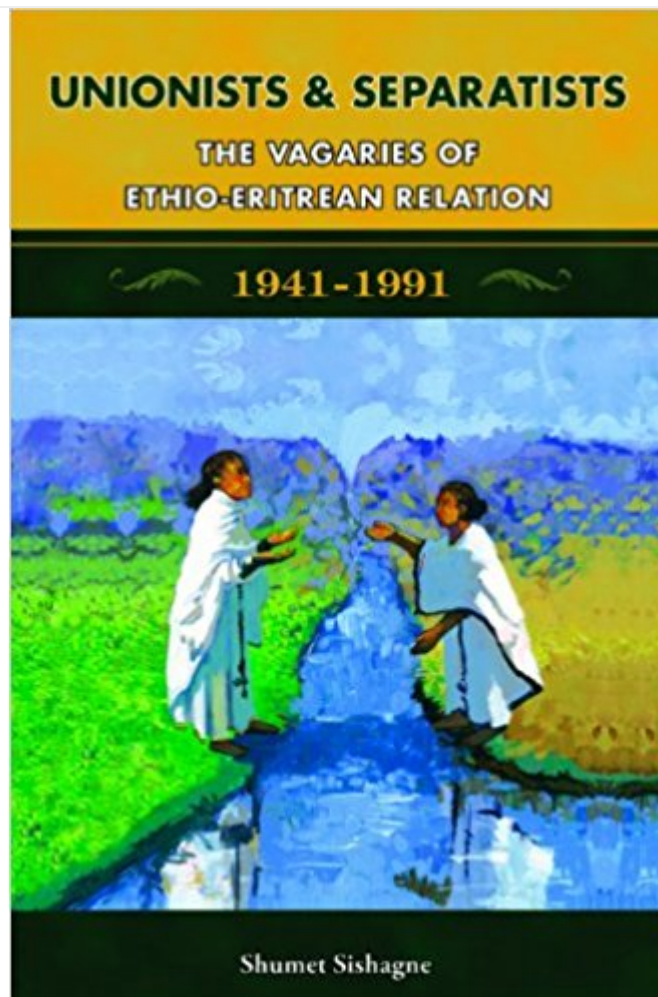


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The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia

Unionists and Separatists: The Vagaries of Ethio-Eritrean Relation 1941-1991



Volume 43 (2010)

Reviewed Work(s)

Unionists and Separatists: The Vagaries of Ethio-Eritrean Relation 1941-1991. By Shumet Sishagne (Hollywood, CA: Tsehai Publishers and Distributors, 2007). Pp. 216. Paper, \$24.95.

More than any English language work published in the last decade, Shumet Sishagne's *Unionists and Separatists* presents a cohesive and well-researched study concerned largely with Ethiopian perspectives on Eritrea's independence movement. Professor Sishagne's study spans the entire five decades of the conflict, beginning with the earliest political movements in the early 1940s, through the outbreak of the armed struggle in 1962, and concludes with Eritrea's military victory over Ethiopia's Dergue regime in 1991. Professor Sishagne's initial argument is that Eritrea's experience under Italian colonial rule (1890-1941) was "neither long enough in its duration nor sufficiently intense" to sever the cultural affinity between Eritrea's mainly Christian Tigrinya highland population and those in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia. While the author's argument and conclusions are not particularly new, *Unionists and Separatists* forces readers to question the degree to which a legitimate irredentist movement within Eritrea simultaneously encouraged calls for independence among activists who did not share the aforementioned "affinity" with their neighbors beyond the border.

Comprised of six chapters, Professor Sishagne's study relies on a wide range of sources, including official publications, interviews, and in particular, archival materials from Britain and Ethiopia. Additionally, the author uses intelligence reports from former staffers stationed at the Ethiopian Liaison office in Asmara as a way to explore the specifics of Ethiopia's policies in Eritrea, especially during the politically turbulent years of the late 1940s and 1950s. The choice of sources is also crucial to the basic arguments that the author lays out in revising the history of "unionist" and "separatist" activity. In the introduction, he presents the argument that "the notion of constructing an Eritrean nation appealed to few people in the territory, and it was firmly resisted particularly by a great majority of the highland population" (3). Sishagne then offers a detailed discussion of the evolution of political activism in post-Italian

colonial Eritrea. In addition to de-emphasizing the Italian influence in Eritrean political and social life, he insists that the major western powers were not as a “pro-Ethiopian” on the Eritrean question as has been widely accepted. Indeed the author makes no effort to hide the fact that his study “questions the widely held view that the West in general, and the United States in particular, handed over Eritrea to Ethiopia on a silver platter” (8).

By far his strongest section, chapter two, entitled “The Establishment of British Military Administration and the Beginning of Organized Political Expression,” revisits the early developments of Unionist and pro-independence activity, mainly through the establishment of the *Mahbar Feqri Hagar* (Love of Country Association). The author presents evidence, taken mainly from British archives and reports from the Ethiopian Liaison office, that the small number of local urban-based intellectuals expressed favorable views of Eritrea’s possible incorporation with Ethiopia. However, Sishagne seems most comfortable and adept when he examines the often contradictory policies of British administrators. Focusing primarily on the actions of the chief British administrators in Eritrea, Brigadier Stephen Longrigg and later Kennedy Trevaskis, Sishagne argues that the presiding officials within the British Military Administration (BMA) tried to quell local calls for Eritrea’s union with Ethiopia and that the “BMA made it understood that those on the side of irredentism would be viewed with disfavor” (34). Indeed, Sishagne’s argument that Unionist elements were often the primary target of British interference runs counter to most previous studies that have focused mainly on British efforts to thwart the Independence movement.

While Sishagne stresses the widespread camaraderie between Eritrean highlanders and Ethiopian activists in the irredentist movement, he fails to fully explore the dynamics of pro-independence activity. With regard to the nationalist impetus, the author does not engage the motivating factors for why such a substantial number of Eritreans, including highlanders, supported autonomy over Ethiopian control throughout the period of British control (1941-52). Sishagne generalizes the aims and even the very ethnic composition of pro-Independence factions. He is quick to categorize most of the independence groups, their leadership and overlook the nuance of their particular platforms. For example,

Sishagne states that “the strongest party which arose in opposition to the Unionists, the Muslim League of Eritrea, was exclusively Muslim and openly championed Muslim interests only” (6). Beyond the basic inaccuracy of this statement, the text as a whole oversimplifies the early independence movement as a divided struggle between pro-Unionist Christians and pro-Independence Muslims. While there is some truth to these religious divisions, Professor Sishagne does not seem interested in exploring or explaining the specifics of how many Christians came into the pro-Independence fold, or for that matter, how activists within the Muslim League worked with Eritrean Christians in trying to bridge the religious divisions to strengthen their political cause. Beyond a brief discussion of highlander fears of Amharic domination in any future Ethiopian government, the text falls short of explaining how and why many former unionists, such as Woldeab Woldemariam, eventually embraced Eritrean autonomy over the “greater Tigray” concept. The book’s peripheral coverage of pro-Independence groups is best illustrated in the author’s decision not to consult the Arabic language newspapers and pamphlets that proliferated during the late 1940s and early 1950s. This is regrettable because using these materials would have allowed the author to further substantiate his claims about the Muslim League and other groups that spread their political platform mainly through Arabic commentaries. This may also help explain why the book’s latter two chapters, which focus on the growth of the armed struggle among the mainly Muslim Eritrean activists, seem less thorough in comparison to the book’s earlier sections.

Despite these shortcomings, *Unionists and Separatists* is significant for its ability to provoke penetrating questions about the trajectory of Eritrea’s political and armed struggle. Sishagne achieves this by problematizing the very foundations on which an “Eritrean” identity emerged. Written in clear, accessible prose and following a straightforward narrative, it is a refreshing contribution to a field that is sometimes plagued with under-researched and hyper-polemic studies.

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